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## MYSTERY MAGAZINE

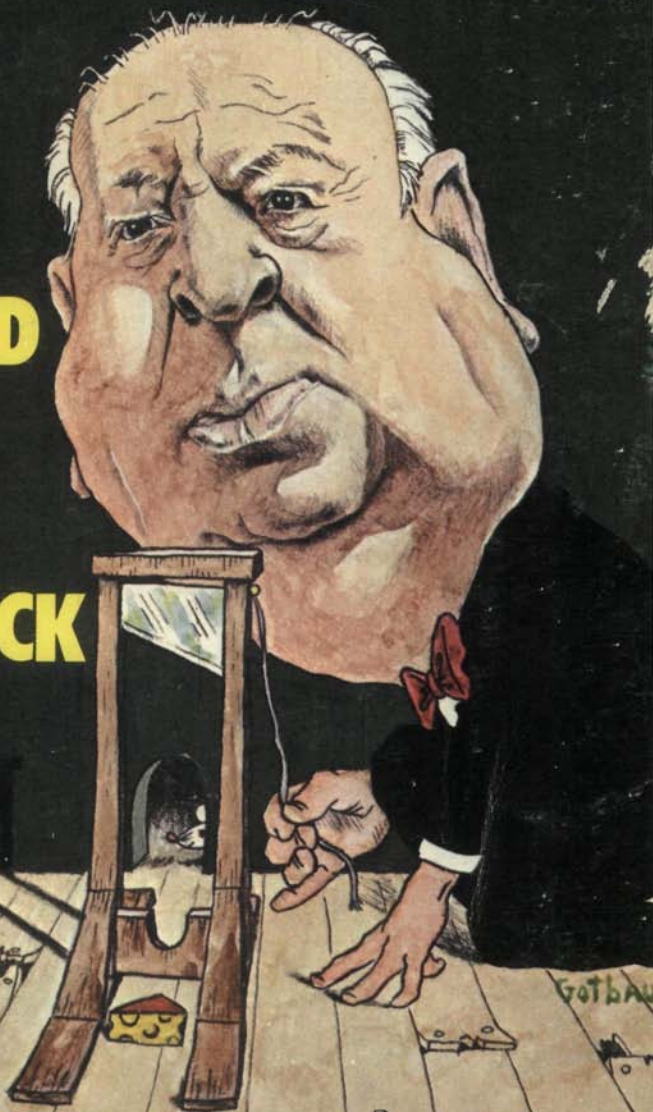
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


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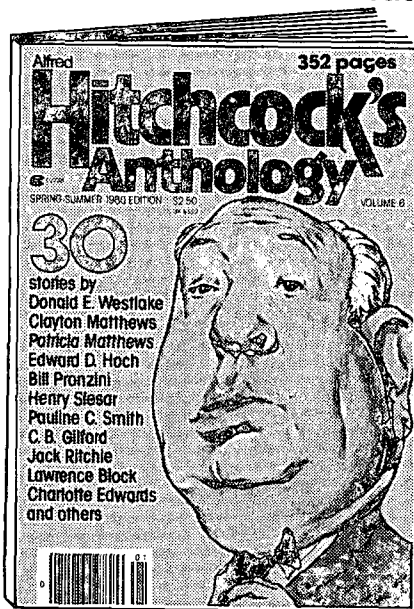
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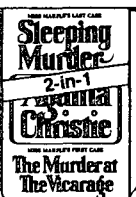
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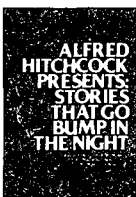
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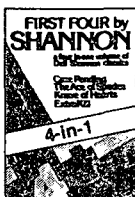
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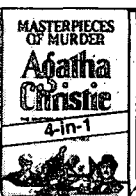
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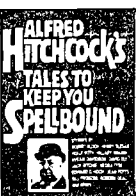
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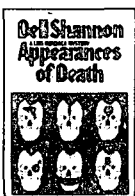
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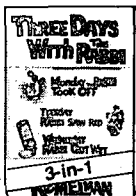
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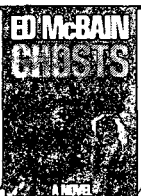
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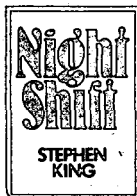
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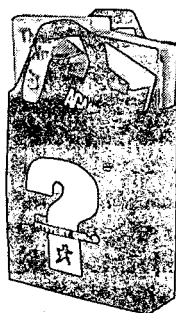
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July 16, 1980

Dear Reader:

Although he enjoyed one of the longest major directorial careers in film history, Alfred Hitchcock's death at eighty years of age strikes us as untimely. Mr. Hitchcock was our mentor and inspiration. His name on this magazine told you that in it you would find stories of suspense and humor in the grand Hitchcock tradition. He always said that after a certain amount of suspense, the audience must find relief in laughter.

And so he set the tone of *AHMM* and so the tone of the magazine will continue. The sly, comic irony and self-mockery that were the soul of his wit will continue to grace the contents and the covers of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*—not with lack of respect but as a tribute to the spirit of fun that was—and always will be—the trademark of Alfred Hitchcock.

Good reading.

The Editors

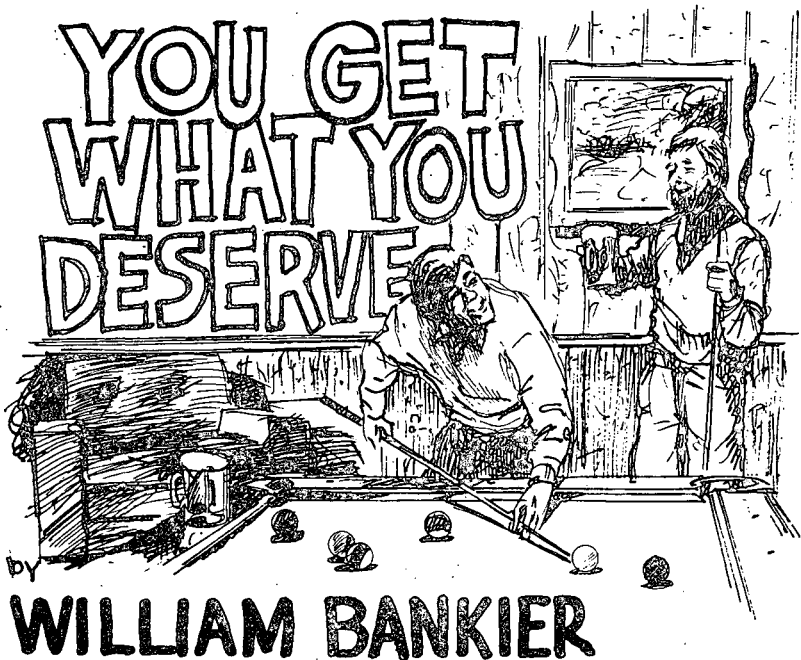
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*People saw Carolina in the morning at their own peril . . .*



**H**ad he not been married to Carolina Hagerty, Gabriel Parsons would never have been allowed inside the Mount Stephen Club. Now here he was under a ceiling panelled by Scottish craftsmen brought to Montreal for that purpose in the early part of the century, doing his effortless number with a pint of beer in his hand. Gabe's specialty was charming people, ladies a little more successfully than men, with his clever conversation and his boyish smile.

YOU GET WHAT YOU DESERVE

"The simple truth is, I may never write another novel," he said. The ladies frowned and cooed as they sipped their champagne, but Gabe was on firm ground. He was being sincere. "Seriously. *Deadly Instruments* came out four years ago. Since then—"

"I loved that book! A series of murders in a symphony orchestra!"

"You *must* do us another, Mr. Parsons!"

"I can't seem to find the time. All I write these days are newspaper reviews of other people's books."

"I never bother to read the novels. A Gabriel Parsons essay is better than the original."

"For that, sweet lady, a kiss on the cheek. There. And another glass of champagne from this ubiquitous waiter's tray." Gabe sent away the pewter mug he had brought with him for a refill of beer. He liked beer. And he felt it placed a subtle emphasis on his working-class origins to have his tankard in evidence among the crystal goblets.

Carolina was drifting from one island of drinkers to another. "I saw that kiss," she scolded, presenting her cheek so that Gabriel could bestow one on her. She was a tall, handsome woman, with healthy skin and narrow blue eyes. Reduced by half, her features could have been described as baby doll. She paid forty dollars to have her tawny hair cut carelessly short and brushed forward. "Is Gabriel seducing all my friends again?"

"I wish he would. Me anyway."

"He's infuriatingly faithful to you, Carolina. Where did you find such a gem?"

"She had him made in her father's factory. Gabe is too good to be real."

No credit to Gabriel Parsons, his fidelity was a fact. He was a monogamist. As a single man, he had flirted and courted, occasionally loved, but never more than one woman at a time. Married now and at the ripe age of forty-eight, he could no more carry on an illicit affair than he could chug-a-lug his beer and sing "Roses of Picardy" at the same time.

"You don't deserve him, Carolina," one of the younger women said. "If there were any justice, someone would take Gabe away from you."

The girl was hinting at Carolina Hagerty's extramarital exploits. It was considered ironic that she divorced her previous husband, Robert Hurst, on grounds of infidelity. A woman of her resources could do as she pleased, of course, but still it seemed unfair that poor Bob was cut adrift



only for practicing what his wife had always preached to any of her friends who would listen.

"Look at those calves," she would say, referring to the legs of a band leader on a raised platform in the Normandie Room at the Mount Royal Hotel. "How would you like to get your hands on those?" Then she'd arrange to do just that in her hospitality suite while her husband was left to see the departing guests into the January night.

Now it was almost time to put the bite on this well heeled crew at the charity affair at the Mount Stephen. They knew why they had been invited. Carolina would ask, and it would be given. Receipts would be issued, and the ultimate loser would be the Internal Revenue Department in Ottawa.

"Gabriel, a word in your ear." Carolina drew her husband into an alcove. He was portly, but he could be steered like a barge on water. "Will you deliver the pitch? Make it persuasive. I want no checks under five hundred dollars."

"I will, of course. But why?"

"Because Bob is here. He's in the anteroom. He sent in word he must see me." Carolina was aggressively open about her meetings with her previous husband. If Gabriel didn't like it, that was his problem.

Gabe liked it. "Give old Bob my best. Tell him we'd like to see him out at High Heaven."

"I certainly will not." Carolina preferred to see Bob Hurst, when it pleased her, at a motel on Upper Lachine Road. "Will you give the pitch?"

"*Avec plaisir*. Leave it to me. Will I see you in the morning?"

That was a laugh. People did not see Carolina Hagerty-Hurst-Parsons in the morning—or, if they did, it was at their peril. She was a night person.

"Darling, you know better. Just spend your usual industrious morning at the typewriter and I'll see you after lunch." A quick kiss and she was gone.

For a change, Carolina went back with Bob to his place—a dismal habitat. He lived in a small apartment across the road from Sir George Williams University on Maisonneuve Boulevard. As they went in, Carolina hoped she would see one of Gabriel's former colleagues from his years as an assistant professor of English. Not that Gabriel cared, but she

enjoyed reminding the world that she needed about ten times as much love as her husband was able to provide.

"This was a good wine when I opened it three days ago," Bob said. He made a theatrical business of using his strong, sunburned hands to squeeze the last drops from the bottle. "They import it from the Galapagos Islands to sell to the winos in Dominion Square. It's called Park Bench Reserve."

"To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Can't I just be starved for your company?"

"I see ambition in those erotic little eyes."

"Don't you want me to succeed?"

"At whose expense? Never mind, what's the project?"

"My aqua-school. Don't make a face. I've found a perfect location beside the lake in Ste. Agathe. There are crowds of tourists there all summer and they'll pay through the snorkel for scuba lessons."

"What will you do in the winter? Fish through the ice?"

"I need ten thousand to get it off the ground."

"Get off my back."

"If I did, you wouldn't like it."

"Hands off, Robert. I hate being rough-housed."

In fact, she loved it.

Later, as she was combing her hair with lacquered fingernails, Robert said, "How is the angel Gabriel?"

"Angelic. I don't know what I ever did to deserve such a blessing."

"Does he know you came out with me?"

"Yes."

"What was his reaction?"

"The usual. Live and let live. Tolerance Forever. As long as we're both happy." She laughed. "At times like this I can't understand why I hate him."

"Why did you marry him?"

"Because it was such a relief to encounter a civilized man after you. Because he graces my entrances and makes all my girl friends jealous. Because I take pride in being married to a published author. Because he's almost old enough to be the father I always wanted closer to me."

"Greedy girl. You've never been satisfied with having the income from Hagerty Electronics. You wanted Hagerty as well."

"At least I'm honest about it."

"Forget your father. He's dead."

"And you're next." His young neck was muscular but she managed to clamp her hands around it.

She was morose when it was time to go. He was pensive.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked as he poured milk from a quart bottle into their mugs of coffee on the kitchen table.

"Tomorrow. I'll wake up as usual feeling like hell resurrected. And I'll hear Gabriel's typewriter out on the top-floor balcony. It may be nine o'clock. Or ten. You can't imagine how it makes me feel hearing that productive sound in the morning."

"It makes you want to kill."

She sighed. It was midnight, so she was able to be calm. "The girl can't help it," she said.

"Why not do it?"

"You jest."

"Knock him off. Literally. The top-floor balcony at High Heaven has a low railing. It's a long way down to the patio. The best murders are made to look like accidents. All you do is tippy-toe out there while he's working, grab the back of his chair, and dump him over the edge."

"I never tippy-toe in the morning. I creep. Like an iguana."

"Just as good."

"Anyway, I'm not a psychopath. I have a conscience. Besides, you just want Gabriel out of the way so you can move back in and get money for your aqua-school."

"Can't blame a man for trying."

Another Thursday, another session in the poolroom. The fact that the snooker table was in the semi-basement playroom at High Heaven instead of in some Montreal back street didn't make Carolina feel any better about her husband's addiction to the game. It was the inevitability of it, the predictability. Four o'clock on Thursday afternoon, Gabriel was on the telephone having one of his peppery conversations with Stewart Sunderland at the ad agency.

"Hey, hey, whadya say, Stewie baby! How's your old straw hat?"

"It's never been felt, Gabe."

Carolina could have supplied the other side of the dialogue even if she had not been listening on the upstairs extension.

"Feel like getting your ass whipped at the old snooker table, my son?"  
"Careful, Parsons, or I'll have to come out there and give you another lesson."

"Why don't you just jump into that parody of a car and drive out to Beaconsfield tonight? Whenever they let you up the shaft and you've brushed the salt from your pant cuffs."

"I'll be there. But I'm warning you. I sold my client three full-page ads today. I'm hot, man."

"See you at seven. You think the rain'll hurt the rhubarb?"

"Not if we keep it in jars."

"And well back on the shelf. See you, Stewie."

Carolina greeted Stewart Sunderland at the door with a kiss on the only bit of exposed face she could find. His brindle hair and beard and scrappy leather jacket matched the rusty MG convertible steaming on the forecourt below the pillared entrance. She saw him to the playroom, where Gabriel was making a production out of practicing shots.

"Have fun, boys. Want me to bring some more beer?"

"I'll see to it later, love."

Upstairs, preparing to go out, Carolina heard their chirpy Newfoundland voices and had to smile. Neither of them had been back to the Island in twenty years. But put them together and they began to sound straight off the ferryboat from St. John's. There was something satisfying about the expensive snooker table being put to use. Her father had installed it and then hardly ever taken the cover off. It became a handy surface on which to pile annual reports and stock prospectuses for gold mines with obscure Indian names. But not any more; these days it was a hustler's paradise down there.

Carolina went outside and stepped into her Continental. While the engine idled, she glanced at the top-floor balcony. The railing certainly was low. She wondered how Gabriel could bring himself to work out there, but he did. On pleasant mornings, the clatter of his typewriter, heard through her bedroom window on the floor below, was proof of that.

Half awake that morning, she had remembered Bob's criminal suggestion and had considered it. Now things were back in perspective. To push Gabriel over the edge would be cold-blooded murder, and with very little provocation. If the sound of his typing disturbed her, she could

ask him to work inside. But the noise was, of course, only a reminder of his insistence on earning a symbolic amount of money. Gabriel refused to belong to her outright, like the house, the factory down the road, and the various club presidencies she had bought with donations.

Carolina switched on the headlights and drove slowly down the lane between rows of young poplars, toward a spur road leading to the Montreal highway. She wanted very much to be with Bob tonight. The concert at Place des Arts could go to hell. She would tell the girls tomorrow that illness had forced her to cancel at the last minute. She would drive in to Maisonneuve and see if Bob was at home. It was troubling to suspect she might be capable of murdering her husband while in a mood of black depression. It was worse to understand why.

Stewart Sunderland sank the black ball in a corner pocket for his third straight victory, but all the games had been close. Gabriel placed the wooden triangle on the table and began to rack up the red balls while his friend placed the colored ones on their spots.

"It's a matter of self-respect," Gabe said, returning to the subject which had been abandoned temporarily as the game reached its climax. "The book reviews keep enough money coming in so that I can clothe myself, take Carolina out for dinner occasionally, and always have cash in my pocket. Without that, I'd be finished as a man."

"But you live in this mansion rent-free. Why not go all the way? Let her support you while you produce another novel."

"I can't. If High Heaven belonged to me I might be able to do good work here, but it's Carolina's house, not mine."

"Then move out."

"That would be perverse, Stewie. I *am* the lady's husband." Gabe was not quite ready to admit that he was using the situation as an excuse not to risk writing another novel. The last one had been only a small success, even by Canadian standards. The next might be a failure. He was safer turning out criticisms of other people's work.

By midnight, Stewie had consumed too much beer to consider driving back to Montreal. It would be the guest room for him. And since he was staying, there was no reason not to have another round of cold, foamy quarts. When Carolina returned at one, they were in full voice down in the game room. She stood silently in the doorway, aware of the smell of Bob's cologne emerging and fading around her, listening to Gabriel and

Stewart singing to the tune of "Roamin' in the Gloamin'."

"Rowing in a dory  
Off the banks of Newfoundland. . .  
Rowing in a dory  
With a codfish in my hand. . ."

She went to bed smiling, feeling at her best. Whatever chemical process would take place in her brain between now and morning, poisoning her outlook and turning her murderous, had yet to happen. Drifting halfway from sleep, she heard them down the hall giggling like schoolboys as they tried to turn down Stewie's covers.

"You keep a fine hotel here, sir."

"We aim to please. You aim, too, please."

"Don't let me sleep in. Got a client meeting at nine."

"Have no fear. I'm always up at seven. Best time of the day."

"Rowing in a dory. . ."

"Shhhhhh!"

Gabriel was romantic when he came to bed. Carolina indulged him. Afterward he said, "I suppose that counts as a superfluous act."

"Do you care that I still see Bob?"

"Where's the logic in my caring? I'm forty-eight years old. You're twenty years younger and so is he. If you were lying to me cheating on me, then I'd be vulnerable. As it is I feel quite secure."

"My friends are right. I don't deserve you."

"You must, or you wouldn't have me. We all get what we deserve."

The steady tack-tack-tack of Gabriel's portable typewriter woke Carolina up. How long had it been penetrating her unconscious mind? For an hour, probably. She made one eye focus on the bedside clock. Yes, it was almost ten.

Black rage surrounded her like a pool of tar. She could barely move in it. The nerve. The smug, self-satisfied nerve. All she wanted was to be allowed to sleep. All she really wanted was oblivion—a few more hours of it, anyway. But no. The little bell dinged, the carriage returned with a slam, the busy hunt-and-peck fingers flashed over the keys. Words, sentences, paragraphs flowed from his mind as he sat up there on the balcony, probably practicing his infuriating deep-breathing while he



worked, using the morning to his benefit, living his life without her, despite her.

"Throw the bastard over." Bob had repeated his suggestion last night. How right he was. What else could she do? And why not? Why the bloody hell not?

She almost tripped on the hem of her nylon robe as she staggered up the stairs. She was half asleep, feeling her way onto the familiar landing by rote, creeping silently into his study with her eyes half closed.

The door onto the balcony was open. She could not see Gabriel himself, only the high round back of the ornate Victorian wicker chair he liked to sit in while he worked. He had not heard her come in. The typewriter chattered on.

As she approached the doorway, still in a state that was half dreaming, Carolina warned herself that she must be quick and she must be strong. Gabriel was a heavy man—a half push would not do.

The back of his chair was within arm's reach. The typing paused, then continued. Carolina gritted her teeth, grasped the wicker frame in both hands, and charged forward. The last thing she saw on the seat of the empty chair as it fell aside and she toppled over the railing was the tape recorder she had given Gabriel for Christmas, a cassette turning slowly on the spindle.

Gabe heard a heavy thud outside the ground-level window as he was concentrating on cutting the pink ball into the side pocket. When he went to the window and saw Carolina's body on the patio, his first thought was that she had committed suicide. He knew how depressed she could be in the morning.

He ran outside and determined that she was dead. A servant joined him, then hurried away to call the police. Gabe went up to his study and out onto the balcony. Here, he was able to put two and two together. She must have come up to talk to him, maybe to complain about the noise. Anyway, operating on a quarter of her awareness as she did this time of day, she had lost her balance and gone over.

For just a few moments, Gabe felt guilty about using the tape recording. Then he reasoned the guilt away. He couldn't work all the time. Yet it was important to him that his image be kept intact; he had wanted Carolina to think of him as a disciplined individual who never played till the day's work was done. It hadn't occurred to him that she would ever discover the tape. She was meant only to hear it.

Besides, Stewie had been very arrogant about his snooker triumph last night. This morning before leaving, he had challenged Gabe to a lunch-time match downtown at the Leader Billiards. There would be ad agency friends in attendance, so Gabe was determined to do well. That was why he had been getting in an extra practice session.

The inquest went off in a straightforward way. Gabriel Parsons was sincere. The coroner was sympathetic. The will left large sums to various charities, but Gabe ended up with outright ownership of High Heaven and more money than he could spend in the remainder of his life even if he were to play snooker daily with balls made of Waterford crystal.

Before Stewie could accept Gabe's invitation to move in, he had to dispose of the lease on his flat in town, but soon the widower and the bachelor were established in the mansion outside Beaconsfield, where Gabe slackened off on his book reviews and Stewie reduced his art direction to a few freelance hours a week. Most days they shot pool.

That is what they were doing when Bob Hurst appeared one evening, keeping an appointment he had respectfully made by letter. He politely refused to take a cue and make the game a three-hander. He was here on business.

"I'd like to open a school that would teach aqualung techniques," he said, going on to outline his scheme and ending with an appeal for ten thousand dollars to get him off the ground or, more accurately, into the water.

"No problem." Gabe wrote a check for that amount between shots.

Hurst seemed dazed. "This is terrific of you, Gabe. Terrific."

"Not at all. A tragic accident has made me a rich man. Maybe you can do me a favor someday."

A few weeks later, Gabriel Parsons turned his back reluctantly on the carefree life of a book reviewer and began to plot a novel. Now that he was secure financially, there was no excuse not to behave like an author. Since Carolina's accident, he couldn't bring himself to work on the balcony. He sat at a desk placed against the locked door, looking out at the morning and feeling a premonition of doom. His book would be published one day and the critics would murder him. Gabriel shrugged. In the end, like everybody else, he would get what he deserved.

*He desperately needed the one shell he had left . . .*

# THE WHISPER OF GOLD

by  
**EDWARD WELLEN**



Tom Chaudis weighed his one loaded shell in his hand. Weighing it, he weighed also his choices, his chances. With a sigh more like a groan he shoved the shell into the shotgun.

By the light of the lantern hanging from a timber he gazed around at the false glints in the mine face. He had put a river of sweat into this hole, the whisper of gold leading him on. But what gold there was had plain pinched up and played out after the first burst of richness. And

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almost all that gold he had long since spent celebrating in town, believing—and leading everyone to believe—the gold had no end. The way he saw it, he had no out now but the load in his shotgun.

He knew that—so why was he putting it off?

As he slowly raised the shotgun he thought he heard the hurry of his heart. He stilled himself to listen harder and heard the hurry of hooves. Now that was a crazy sound to be coming from the ground outside with all its cracks and chuck holes. He lowered the shotgun and rounded the tunnel bend to the mouth of the mine and the blaze of day.

He gaped at the mad ride—and at the mad rider, a woman streaming yellow hair. Then he saw that the woman had lost hold of the reins and was hanging onto the saddlehorn. Something—a rattler, maybe—had spooked the mare into running wild, white-eyed.

As Tom watched, the mare plunged into a hole, dropped to her knees, and flung the rider from the saddle. The woman landed forked end up, then folded and lay still. Tucking his shotgun under his arm, Tom ran to her.

He knelt beside the woman and looked for broken bones. Coming quickly out of her daze, she stopped his fumbling. "I'm all right. See to my mare."

Tom wasn't so sure the woman was all right, but he moved to the mare, ran his hand along her left foreleg, and found the break. He turned to the woman and shook his head.

The young woman, her bright hair tangled, had shoved herself upright. She stood swaying slightly—wobbly, but on her own two feet—smudges and all, a pretty woman. High-grade, but kind of ornery to be out this way all by her lonesome. Wilful, used to getting her way—which would stay respectable, though off the beaten track. Right now, with grief for the mare twisting her face, she seemed not so sure of herself. And not so sure she liked her present company. The way she eyed him sidelong, he must pan out mean, look like a man searching for a dog to kick.

He rubbed his face, throwing himself back to the last time he had shaved. That had been in town, and the woman he had been with had hardly assayed out to the purity of this kind of woman. This kind of woman he had always dreamed of but never aspired to. Now that she was suddenly real and at hand he felt strange, as though in a dream. Standing there with her yellow hair stirring gently in the hot slow breath of noon, she seemed like a whisper of gold come to life to lead him on.

Maybe things could work out so that . . .

Hell with it. He had no time for such thoughts. What he had was to get shut of her so he could do what he set out to do when she came along. He tried to think how he might speed her on her way. He had lost his own burro to a rattler or he would have given it to her for the ride home.

The mare's humble nickering gave him a guilty start, but he made no move to put the mare away. Averting her gaze from the mare and frowning in surprise and impatience at Tom's inaction, the woman gestured toward his shotgun.

"Aren't you going to—?"

Automatically he raised the shotgun to his shoulder, took aim, and actually had his finger on the pull. Then he lowered the shotgun without firing. Stonily, feeling a fool, he stood that way.

The woman stared, then raised her voice, more in wonder than in outrage. "What are you waiting for?"

Then her face changed and he could almost see her think he lacked the nerve. She reached out toward the shotgun.

"If you want, I—"

He felt even more a fool—a shameful fool. "It isn't that. I'm sorry, ma'am, but I need the shell. I'll put her away though."

He leaned the shotgun against a boulder, took up a length of weathered two-by-four, and, stretching himself into savagery, brought the wood down hard. With a sick sound the wood connected. He heard the woman's breath. The blow stung his palms, but the mare only lay stunned. He threw the timber aside, drew his sheath knife, and sawed her throat, all too aware of the woman watching in horror with the edge of an eye, and only just jumped away from the bloody gush. He stabbed the gritty soil to cleanse the blade before sheathing the knife, then picked up his shotgun before facing the woman.

Her cheeks flamed through trail powder and he could see her think, Butcher!

He gestured an apology. "I have just the one shell, and I'm saving it."

"I see," she said, clearly not seeing. Still, she seemed inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. She looked away from the mare and brought a surface smile into being. "I don't want to saddle you with my troubles, but I have to think about getting back." She waited. When he came up with silence her smile slipped away and she went on. "I guess I'll just dust myself off and head on home."

He wanted to say yes and no—to keep her here and get rid of her. He found himself saying, “No. Wait here a spell, till an hour past noon. The banker’s coming from town to look over my claim.”

Her smile came back. She found a smooth rock, dusted it and herself off, and sat. “You’re Tom Chaudis, aren’t you? I heard about you and your mine. In fact, someone pointed you out to me in town.”

His face burned and he felt glad for the growth of beard. He wondered how and where he had been when she had seen him. He hoped it hadn’t been in the company of a dance-hall girl and a bottle.

Suddenly he had a terrible thought, a joyously unworthy thought. Could it be he had touched a chord of jealousy and desire in this high-grade girl? Then he had an even more terrible thought, a bitterly malicious thought. Could it be this whisper-of-gold girl was herself subject to the pull of riches?

Sure funny that she had chosen to ride out this desolate way, reach this particular claim. Was she after all within reach, within grasp, buyable?

The shotgun came back into his awareness. He didn’t have much time. The sun had begun to lose its high.

His mind fevered, trying to figure what color he could give his going back into the mine and what judgment she would make when she heard the shot.

He gathered himself to make the move, then froze.

The woman, mistaking his stiffness and trying to keep the one-sided conversation going, gave a self-conscious little laugh. “But I haven’t minded my manners. I’m Margie Lawrence—”

“Don’t move.”

But he had spoken his harsh whisper too late. Margie, awaking to the realization that he was staring past her, was already rising to turn and see what had caught his eye.

She saw the rattler.

The diamondback, set in an S to strike, was close enough for Tom to see the deep pit between eye and nostril on each side of the questing head. Margie’s start drew the rattler’s stare.

A rattler usually struck one-third its length away, but it could strike its full length away. Margie stood two feet from this six-footer.

Tom drew some hope from the rattler’s silence, though he knew truth often gave the lie to the myth of a sportsmanlike shake of the rattle. The



silence gave Tom mulish strength to do nothing, though Margie's eyes begged him to blast the diamondback with his precious shell.

Why couldn't Margie have come an hour earlier or an hour later? Why now? Why here? Why him?

Margie swayed. The snake would see any sudden movement as a threat. To fall in a faint would be fatal. Damn the woman!

In controlled fury Tom raised the shotgun, took snap aim, and fired.

The shot tore into the rattler and retwisted it flat and still. The shot bespattered the diamond pattern with golden glints. It brought Margie back to life.

Her gaze fixed on the gold-flecked remains. Her eyes narrowed, then widened. Tom, empty of feeling, watched her face change to mask her understanding.

"Thanks," she whispered hoarsely.

He answered with a curt nod.

She would know now why he had been so unwilling to spend the shot, even in need. He had loaded the shell with the last of his gold, meaning to salt the mine, hoping to dazzle the banker into believing the mine was a bonanza.

It was with near-relief that Tom welcomed the sight of the banker's buggy sedately trailing dust. Quickly he used the shotgun barrel to lift-toss the mortal coil into the brush. He glanced at Margie. Her face was blank.

While they waited in heavy silence, the buggy grew out of distance, bringing the banker and his son, the son at the reins. Seeing them, the son gave a touch of the whip for a dashing pull-up. He looped the reins around the buggy whip in its socket and leaped out. "Margie! What in tarnation are you doing way out here?" His gaze, coldly accusing, whipped across Tom's face. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, William."

"What happened?" He offered her a fresh handkerchief and a water flask.

She took them with gratitude and dabbed her face partway clean. "Lady Fancy spooked, ran away with me, and broke her leg."

The banker and his son followed her gesture toward the corpse of the mare, then quickly away. "That would account for the shot we heard," the banker said.

Margie cocked her head to one side and threw a glance Tom's way.

"Yes, it would." Her eyes darted toward the brush where the dead snake lay and she drew a shuddering breath. "Would you take me back to town?"

The banker said, "Surely." He eyed the mine opening and swiftly veiled his gold-hungry look. "Just allow us a few minutes to do our business here, my dear, and we'll be on our way." He turned to Tom.

Tom cut him off before he started. "Sorry you had to ride out here for nothing. When I sent word in, I was sure I'd found a lode, but I guess I was wrong. Ain't no mine worth selling or buying. Ain't nothing here for nobody."

The son handed Margie into the buggy. "Lucky we went on a wild-geese chase in this case."

The father looked sour, but said nothing.

Margie looked at Tom and, after a flicker of some feeling Tom could lay no name to, nodded farewell. And then it was as if Tom had never been.

The son took up the reins, gave a touch of the whip, and said something to Margie. Her laugh drifted back, streaming with her yellow hair.

Tom stood watching them ride away till they pinched up and played out.

He rubbed his beard thoughtfully, then hunted the dead rattler in the brush, taking care—he didn't want to run across the rattler's mate or kin. He found the riddled skin and used the shotgun barrel to pick it up. It hung limp, but as it twisted slightly with breeze-given false life, it glinted.

That glint was worth saving. He would build a fire and reduce the snake to ashes. Reducing the snake to ashes and panning the ashes—that seemed the best way to reclaim the gold he had meant to salt the mine with.

Later he would make up his mind whether to blow the gold on dance-hall girls and redeye or to buy stagecoach passage back to the family farm.

Either way, it looked like it was his hard lot to be honest, in spite of himself.



*Belle was the last of a vanishing breed . . .*

# THE MAIDEN AUNT

by **PATRICIA L.  
SCHULZE**



I have never heard the organ in church rolling out that one special march just for me. Never held a child of my own close to my breast in the still hours of the night and calmed its fretful cries with gentle croons. Never suffered the joys, fears, and sorrows of being a wife or of motherhood. I have devoted my life to serving others and been much too busy for such selfish things.

For a few short years I served by teaching school, but long before  
THE MAIDEN AUNT

either parents or school board discovered my inadequacy I gave up the toil of trying to implant knowledge in unreceptive, unwilling young minds and took myself back to the home of my parents.

It was there, in the midst of my loving family, that I drifted into what was to become my lifelong profession.

I was born early in my parents' marriage and had lived my childhood as an only child, a situation I found no great hardship—indeed, it was much to my liking. Then, shortly before my sixteenth birthday, my parents unthinkingly discovered some untapped fount of fertility and I was avalanched by six siblings in six years. It was perhaps to escape the noise and chaos of a house full of infants that I conceived my short-lived teaching career.

When I returned to my family at the age of twenty-six, the youngest, my brother George, was already five and the rest of the children were in school. For many years I helped out at home, my mother being a little overwhelmed by her enlarged family and, perhaps for the first time, grateful for my physical attributes. I had a face so plain as to be called homely by the unkind and a more-than-slight tendency toward plumpness, which guaranteed that I would not be tempted from her side by ardent suitors.

I found my real role in life when my sister Julie was married. Completely bemused by the miracle of newfound love, Julie was clearly not up to planning the kind of wedding the town would expect for a Whitlow daughter, and Momma was equally flustered by what seemed to her an insurmountable task. Quickly and efficiently I took matters into my own hands.

The wedding was a complete success and firmly established my reputation as an organizer. When my brother Harold took it in mind to take a wife, to whom should the family of the bride turn to smooth out the rough spots but his dear sister Belle?

It was Julie, again, who established me in my new life and gave a name to my profession. She was soon in what she liked to call "an interesting condition" and in short order was delivered of an eight-pound, fourteen-ounce baby boy, which act so depleted her delicate strength that it was only natural that Aunt Belle should move in for the first weeks of adjustment to care for both mother and child.

A few more weddings, a few more births, the unfortunate death of my

youngest sister Claire and the resulting funeral which I handled with near perfection, and I was well launched as the family's maiden aunt.

I continued living in my parents' home, though I wasn't often there. Even with Claire's death I had three brothers and two sisters remaining, and the seemingly endless arrival of young nephews and nieces called for frequent absences.

My joy in this riot of fecundity was marred but once, and then only briefly, by the passing away of Momma and Papa within a few weeks of each other. I was cheered up when the will was read and I learned that my dear parents had left me the old family home and enough money to run it comfortably. My brothers and sisters were completely satisfied with the arrangement. It was now accepted that I would probably never marry, and they didn't really want me to live with any of them on a permanent basis.

The only problem with being a maiden aunt is that at some point in one's career one reaches a hiatus—a brief period when no demands are being made. As we all grew older, the members of my family finally outgrew the need to reproduce themselves with such frequency, and the next generation was a few years removed from weddings as yet. In fact, for a long time the only duty I performed was a funeral for the oldest son of my middle brother, Jack. The poor boy misjudged the grade of a curve he was rounding on a stolen motorcycle at one o'clock in the morning.

But for several years my services were not much needed, and as they grew greyer and began to fear old age, my brothers and sisters began to discuss with some concern who should be responsible for me when I was no longer able to care for myself.

My parents had left a few investments which assured me of a small income—enough, provided I could always care for myself—but my younger siblings seemed to think they detected signs of approaching weakness. In truth, they had nothing to fear. I had made provision for the future many years before, but for reasons of my own I chose not to enlighten them. I rather enjoyed the consternation they tried to hide around me, the suddenly hushed conversations when I entered the room. I delighted in imagining the frantic discussions between husbands and wives late at night. Who would get stuck with Aunt Belle?

Actually, I was in better health than any of them and perfectly content to sit out the lull and wait for the next generation to grow to the age of weddings and birthings . . .

If I have one complaint with young people today it is that they have no regard for tradition. There I sat, surrounded by nieces and nephews, waiting for them to call on my services. But do you think one of them called?

Those who married did so in forest glades, at the bottom of the ocean, or on horseback. The rest preferred more casual living arrangements which needed no helping hand of a maiden aunt. As for the babies born of these unorthodox unions, they seemed to be born one day and traipsing across mountains or through Europe in backpacks the next. Not one of my nieces had the decency to have a delicate delivery or an extended recovery.

I finally realized that what I had considered a predictable and temporary lull in my working life had become permanent. I had only two choices—to sit around and try to outlive my brothers and sisters so that I would be needed to arrange funerals, or to put my retirement plan into action.

I chose the latter.

When I was a young child, long before the days of brothers and sisters, I had a maiden aunt, one of my father's older sisters. I still remember the softness of her voice, the coolness of her touch when she nursed me through my childhood bout of chicken pox. She was a fixed point in my childhood, someone who would always be there. Then one day she wasn't, and no explanations were ever given. Through the years my memory of her faded until the time when I followed in her footsteps, so to speak. Then the memory returned and I asked my father what had happened to her.

It seems she too had reached that hiatus, but rather than ride out this quiet time she decided to fill in the gap. It was after the unexpected and unexplained deaths of my father's two younger sisters that the family decided Aunt Sadie must be quickly and quietly put away, both for her own good and their own safety.

The memory was painful for my father, and it was with the greatest reluctance he'd admitted that Aunt Sadie was still alive and gave me the address of the institution that was now her home.

I thought it my duty to pay her a family visit. That visit was an important event in my life and many more followed. Aunt Sadie herself was the sprightly little woman I had remembered, and I soon fell in love with Sunnyvale, her new home.



It was warm and homey, the inmates living in small cottages rather than the sterile institutional buildings I had expected. The grounds were extensive and well cared for. The staff was admirable in their attention to and attitude toward the inhabitants. Because this was a home for the hopelessly insane, no annoying interrupting attempts were made at therapy or cure.

The cost of all this comfort was so modest that my small income would cover it nicely. I decided it was the ideal place for me in my retirement. The only problem was that in order to be committed to a home for the hopelessly insane one needs to be hopelessly insane, but I knew I could take care of that detail when the time came.

Now, it seemed, was that time.

To carry out my plan I needed a confederate. I had chosen my youngest brother, George, for this role. George had always seemed more intelligent than the others, and he most closely resembled my father in delicacy of family feeling. A few hints, once I had put my plan into action, a subtle mention of Sunnyvale, and he would see to my quiet and dignified commitment.

I chose my brother Harold for my first victim. (Jack's wife still needed him, having never completely recovered from the death of their son.) Harold was a weekly visitor, more for the attraction of my liquor cabinet than for any interest in my conversation. His wife kept all spirits under lock and key at home. Also, Harold had a heart condition, and a maiden aunt picks up a certain amount of medical knowledge through the years. Once he'd passed out in my living room it was no problem at all giving him the injection that sped him out of this life. Our family doctor wrote out the death certificate without a blink.

My sister Julie was the next most expendable. I waited only two weeks before I lured her to the house on the pretext of trying out a new dessert. She spent most of her waking hours eating chocolates and watching soap operas and game shows. I wasn't even sure her husband would notice she was gone. I chose a quick push down the stairs for her and the death was recorded as accidental—indeed, in view of her massive girth, almost inevitable.

At Julie's funeral I drew George aside and dropped a hint.

"I feel so guilty about this. I feel I'm responsible for poor Julie and Harold."

"Nonsense," George snorted. "Why should you feel responsible?"

"Well, after all, they were both at my house when they died."

I went home and waited in vain for George to become suspicious. I had just decided that he was not as intelligent as I had thought and had selected Jack as my next victim—his wife would just have to learn to get along without him—when George called, pleading an urgent need to talk to me.

When I opened the door I noticed at once that George looked years older, very grey, and drawn at the mouth.

"I had to talk to you, Belle," he said. "No one knows I'm here; I haven't even told Beatrice yet. I don't want to upset her."

I had to stifle a laugh. George's wife, Beatrice, was about as flappable as a sheet of solid steel, but maybe the knowledge that her sister-in-law was a mass murderer would disturb even her equanimity.

I showed George in and poured him a glass of wine, the Concord grape that I kept as fitting to the image of a maiden aunt. He drained it at one gulp.

"I want to talk to you about Harold and Julie," he said when I had refilled his glass and we were settled comfortably before the fireplace. "Their deaths have started me thinking."

"I know what you're thinking, George, and I'll spare you the distaste of saying it. You're right. I did it."

He looked startled and leaned forward in his chair.

"Did what, Belle?"

"I killed them." The look on his face made me pause. "Isn't that what you thought? Why you wanted to talk to me?"

"Not at all," he sputtered, searching for words. "Now, Belle, I know what you're feeling. We were all shocked by their deaths. It brings it home to all of us that we aren't getting any younger. We all feel a little guilty too, but that's only natural; not because we think we're responsible but because we can't help feeling a little twinge of relief that it was them and not us. But you mustn't start blaming yourself."

God save me from amateur psychologists. George *was* smarter than the rest, but as the poet said, "A little learning is a dangerous thing." I saw I was going to have to spell it out for him. I told him in brutal detail how I had pushed Julie down the stairs and how I had helped Harold to his end.

"Jack was to be the next one," I said. "Just a little arsenic—the kind

you can find lying around any house—in his wine.” I gave a significant nod at the empty wine glass in George’s hand.

George dropped the wine glass and staggered to his feet, his face even greyer, his lips turning blue. He clutched wildly at his chest.

“Take it easy, George—there was nothing in your wine,” I said. “I wouldn’t do anything to you. I need your help!”

Gurgling, George staggered across the room, tripped over the coffee table, and hit his head a nasty crack on the fireplace as he fell.

I rushed over to him just in time to hear him say, “Not poison. Heart.” I felt around for a pulse, listened for a heartbeat, but George was gone forever.

So it was not suspicion that had caused the change in him but worry about his heart. That was what he had wanted to tell me, and I had got him excited enough to bring on the attack he feared.

I was devastated by this abrupt end to my well laid plans, but I managed to pull myself together. I couldn’t leave him lying there. And someone would have to tell Beatrice.

I had actually reached for the phone before my good sense returned and I realized George might still be put to some use.

The room was already in a mess, thanks to George’s dying struggle. I just added a few more touches and it was ready. I took the poker from the fireplace and used it to enlarge the wound on his head, getting plenty of blood on one end and my fingerprints on the other. Then I called the police and turned myself in.

In the normal course of things, if three sudden and suspicious, not to mention violent, deaths occur in a short time in the same place, with only one other person present each time, and that person confesses to all three murders, the police arrest that person for murder. Then a smart lawyer pleads his client innocent for reasons of insanity, the judge and jury agree, and the guilty person is committed to, if not Sunnyvale itself, someplace quite like it. At least, so I thought.

Unfortunately, the County Coroner also happened to be our family doctor. He had already signed the first two death certificates, was fully aware of George’s heart condition, and quickly ruled out the head injury as the cause of death. The Chief of Detectives was a college graduate who had at sometime in his life wandered into a psychology class and thought he had learned something. My confession was brushed aside as

the illogic of overwhelming grief; I was sedated and handed over to the care of my family.

That meant Beatrice. Beatrice, whom George had been so anxious to protect. She came through as I could have predicted and handled both the funeral arrangements and the plans for my future with no-nonsense efficiency.

Their oldest daughter, Serena, had come home for her father's funeral. Beatrice chose her as the ideal person to move into my house and care for me until I came to my "senses." After a brief stint in the Peace Corps in Afghanistan and two years of tramping the Apennines with her latest boy friend, Serena declared herself through with public service and men forever and only too happy to take over my care. In fact, she vowed, it was just the role she would have chosen and she intended to pattern her life after mine.

And here she has been ever since. I'm not sure how it will all work out. Serena is very easy to live with and seems to enjoy being helpful, but she's really quite pretty. In time she may lose some of her disgust for men.

I'll just have to see. If in a few years she still seems sincere in pursuing this career, I'll have to tell her about Aunt Sadie and Sunnyvale. Some of the children of my nieces and nephews are growing up and, looking them over, I can see it's possible that Serena and I are the last of a vanishing breed.

**The August 13 issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale July 17.**

*Rodney had worked out the details of the murder . . .*

# That Kind of World

by  
**JOHN  
LUTZ**



**"Is he dead for sure?"**

Rodney Bolton nodded to his sister Alissa Sue as he stepped up out of the slanted Ozark sunlight into the shade of the plank porch. Behind him, his younger brother Jake slammed the one workable door on the rusty Dodge pickup and walked toward the porch to join them.

"Ain't nobody smilin'," Alissa Sue said, forcing her own smile. "Ain't it what we planned?"

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"Sure, Ally," Jake said with a strained enthusiasm belied by his tanned, somber face.

Rodney was the only one of the Bolton siblings whose long, bony features appeared genuinely cheerful. "Jake's still a mite shaky," he said, grinning at his sister, who was now a widow.

Alissa Sue frowned at him. She was a pretty girl just turned twenty-two, with dark brown hair, a buxom lithe figure, and innocent blue eyes that had caused a sensation among the local males until her marriage three years ago to Feeny Clark. "Somethin' go wrong?" she asked Rodney.

"Not wrong," Rodney said, "jus' difficult. Feeny didn't die right away after we hung him, and watchin' it kinda affected young Jake."

"Had to keep holdin' his hands down so he couldn't grab the rope an' hoist hisself up," Jake said. "Took him a time to give out."

"But he's dead," Alissa Sue said brightly. "An' that's what counts." She smiled her best smile, which was something special and at the moment held an extra glitter. "I made us some lemonade. That oughta get Jake to be his old self."

Rodney was sure Jake would rather have a few jolts of the powerful corn liquor brewed by old Chadwith, but all the Bolton children had been raised in a house that saw no hard drinking. Lemonade sufficed, and by the time the late-afternoon sun had dropped beyond the leafy green spread of the old elm near the derelict silo, Jake was his relaxed and amiable self.

Of the three, Rodney was the planner—though killing Feeny had really been Alissa Sue's idea—and as he sat with his boots propped high on the porch rail, watching dying shadows and sipping lemonade, he thought back over what had taken place.

Alissa Sue had found out a month ago that Feeny was stepping out with Betty Ann Willton. It was a romance that figured to stay strictly on the sly, as the Clarks and the Willtons had been feuding for nearly a hundred years, but none of the Clarks or Willtons would have been half so mad as Alissa Sue was. And Alissa Sue was wont to act on her anger.

The fourth Bolton child, the middle brother Carl, was an insurance investigator in St. Louis, and he worked for the company that held the policy on Feeny Clark's life. That was what gave Alissa Sue the idea. She could easily enlist her brothers' help. In the deep Ozarks, a man committing adultery had good cause to fear his wife's brothers. Besides, there



was \$20,000 in insurance money to split, and Rodney and Jake had never liked Feeny.

So Alissa Sue told them about Betty Ann Willton and made up a few things to boot, letting them glimpse some self-inflicted bruises that she blamed on Feeny. Carl Bolton would be the natural one to investigate Feeny's death for the insurance company, which wouldn't relish sending a stranger to the wilds, and he would easily give a finding of suicide. Carl wouldn't be in on the plan; that way it would be more convincing. Besides, Carl wasn't like his brothers and sister. Especially now, since he'd become what Rodney called citified.

It was Rodney who worked out the details of the plan, made everything simple and safe. One day, when Feeny came home from work at the lead mine, Rodney and Jake would be waiting for him in the small cabin where he and Alissa Sue lived. They would have a rope slung over a beam with a hangman's noose ready and waiting to deal swift and profitable justice. They would hang Feeny by the neck and make it appear as if he'd hanged himself by kicking a stool out from under him. Feeny was a small man. He'd be easy to handle.

And everything had gone smoothly except for Feeny not dying right away. But then, Rodney supposed that was a something that hadn't gone smoothly for Feeny. It didn't hurt the plan at all.

After Feeny was dead, Rodney got the low oak stool Alissa Sue used when reaching things in the top cupboards. He had made sure some of the greyish mud from Feeny's boots was on the stool, then let it roll aside as though Feeny had stood on it, slipped the noose over his head, and stepped off.

Rodney watched a hawk circling high above the elm in narrowing, soaring arcs, saber-winged and rigid against the breeze. He was satisfied with Feeny's death. It wasn't likely Betty Ann would come forward and admit to adultery with a man now dead, so Alissa Sue could play the bereaved widow and have no apparent motive for killing her husband. And, if Betty Ann did say something, it would appear that Feeny had found a way out of his romantic predicament through suicide. And supposing, by some far-removed chance, Feeny's death was found to be murder, the finger of suspicion would naturally point to the Willton clan.

Alissa Sue went into the house to rinse the glasses and pitcher and put them away. Rodney saw a large colorful butterfly zigzagging its way above the barn roof. The circling hawk spotted the butterfly at the same time

Rodney did, for it folded its wings and dropped like a stone to within ten feet of the butterfly, then hit the unsuspecting insect at full speed.

Rodney smiled. It was that kind of world, all right. Best admit it and act accordingly. "Ally Sue!" he called. "Time for you to be gettin' home to find your husband!"

Alissa Sue giggled as she jumped down off the porch and strolled, her hips swaying, toward the trail to her cabin.

"I s'pose he'll wait," she called back over her shoulder.

But it was Betty Ann Willton who discovered Feeny Clark's body, and the nearby hunters drawn by her screams found her babbling and hugging the strung-up dead man to her breast.

When Betty Ann had calmed down some, she realized she might as well tell about her love affair with Feeny, and, in fact, she seemed almost relieved to tell anyone who would listen. She also told everyone that Feeny had said he knew his wife Alissa Sue suspected them.

Now, that was something the bereaved widow and her brothers hadn't planned on. But, as long as Feeny's death was considered a suicide, there was still no danger. And they had little doubt as to how their brother Carl would decide. The only bone in the soup might be in the person of Colver County Sheriff Billy Wintone.

Feeny Clark was thin as well as only five and a half feet tall. Wintone helped to load the body into Doc Amis's Ford station wagon, and it felt to be not much more than a handful of air. There was a nasty bluish-red groove running the circumference of Feeny's neck. Feeny had been a handsome man, but now the look on his face was a long way from that.

Wintone watched the dust from Doc Amis's departing wagon settle, then he instructed everyone to go home. Except, of course, poor Alissa Sue, scorned by life and death, who voluntarily left to stay with her brothers at the family's old farm.

Everyone there knew the sheriff and obeyed without hesitation. Wintone was a moderately tall man, heavy enough to make him nearly huge. He had a flesh-padded yet sharp-featured, almost haughty face topped by a boyishly curly mop of brown hair. His bulk and his heavy-lidded blue eyes suggested a slowness of mind and body, but when need be he could think and move with the unexpected suddenness of lightning. And with almost the force.

When everyone had gone, Wintone let himself back into Feeny Clark's

cabin and looked around again, this time more slowly. The cabin was a two-room affair with a small L-shaped kitchen off to one side of the main living area. There was no attic beneath the steeply pitched roof. The beam to which the rope had been tied crossed the cabin at the midway point and was ten feet, the height of the walls, above the floor. Wintone walked idly about the cabin, probing with his eyes, letting his mind dart in various directions in the hope that it might strike something solid.

The stool, still mud-caked, that Feeny had stood on lay on its side near a corner of the old sofa. It was a small stool used only for reaching, only two feet high. Wintone walked over and poked a finger into the now hardened mud. Then he confiscated the rope from which Feeny had dangled and left the cabin.

When he'd driven back to Colver and opened the door to his office, Wintone saw Betty Ann Willton seated in the oak chair near his desk, waiting for him. He had a good idea of what she was going to tell him.

Wintone unstrapped his holstered revolver and hung it on the brass hook of a coat rack. It was warm in the office despite the struggling window air conditioner, and there were dark crescents of perspiration on his tan uniform shirt. He settled into the swivel chair behind his cluttered desk. The never-oiled chair yowled like a spooked cat, causing Betty Ann to flinch and screw her pleasant blonde features into temporary ugliness.

"I s'pose you know I'm here about Feeny," she said.

"I am sorry about it, Betty Ann."

"Sure you are, Sheriff." She meant that. "Somethin' I think you oughta know though."

Wintone looked her wearily in the eye and waited. A bluebottle fly droned across the office and struck the metal venetian blinds on the front window with surprising impact.

"Feeny didn't kill himself," Betty Ann said flatly. "He wouldn't have."

"Natural you'd feel like that, Betty Ann."

Then she surprised Wintone. "We was gonna run away together," she said, "clear outa the county, maybe to another state."

Wintone sat back in the squealing chair and tapped a broken pencil point on the desk. "When was you figurin' on leavin'?" he asked.

"End of the week. There wasn't any doubt in Feeny's mind, nor in mine."

"Sometimes you can't see or sense another person's doubt."

"I could have in Feeny." She stood up, a wispy resolute girl holding

herself more erect than usual. "I ain't gonna rile you with dumb woman's sentimental wrong-headedness," she said. "I only wanted to tell you what I thought you'd have need to know."

"My thanks, Betty Ann."

She nodded and went out into the heat without looking at him again.

Wintone sat for a long time listening to the buzz of the fly trapped between the half-closed blinds and the window. What Betty Ann had told him carried weight. And Feeny, to Wintone's way of thinking, wasn't the sort to commit suicide—though Wintone knew the possible error of that kind of reasoning. One way or the other, he'd have to find some answers to the question Betty Ann had left with him.

Carl Bolton came to Colver the next day as a representative of Midwest Trust Insurance. His job was to make a cursory investigation of Feeny's death and write his report and recommendation to his employer. The insurance company would then certainly turn over \$20,000 to Feeny's young widow. The fact that Feeny's death was judged to be suicide would in no way affect payment. In the state suicide was legally regarded as the result of mental illness. For insurance purposes, Feeny might as well have died from cancer or getting hit by lightning.

A tall, lean man with a full moustache, wearing gold-rimmed glasses and a three-piece suit, Carl Bolton stood near the dented file cabinets in Wintone's office and asked for the preliminary findings on his brother-in-law's death.

"I'd hold up a while on my report," Wintone advised him.

Carl rested his fists on his hips. "There's only one reason I can think of for you to tell me that," he said.

Wintone nodded. "There's a possibility of murder."

"I've got the autopsy report right here." With the shiny toe of his boot, Carl nudged a leather attaché case on the floor beside him. "According to it, Feeny died of strangulation."

"No argument there."

"You're saying somebody hanged him?"

"I'm sayin' there's a thing or two that needs to be cleared up." Wintone considered telling Carl Bolton what Betty Ann had said, but he thought better of it. Carl was family of the deceased. "Jus' give me a day or so, Carl."

Bolton glanced at his wristwatch as if minutes counted.

"I've got to get back to St. Louis, Sheriff," he said.

Wintone shrugged. "You can write your report any way you want and then go, if you ain't interested in the truth."

A bead of perspiration traced an angled route down Carl Bolton's temple and along his jawline. He sighed and nodded to Wintone. "I'd better stick around, Sheriff."

After Carl Bolton had gone, Wintone wondered if he could actually prove that Feeny hadn't hanged himself. That proof had to be the crucial piece of evidence. Establishing motive and opportunity simply wasn't enough.

He got up, put on his wide-brimmed hat, and sauntered down the street to the Colver Bank. That was the most likely place for Feeny to have kept an account, provided he didn't bury his meager savings somewhere on his property.

Ollie Deseter, the bank's president, ran a check and told Wintone that Feeny had closed out his six-hundred-dollar savings account two days before his death. Wintone had Deseter check further and produce the withdrawal slip. The savings account listed Feeny and Alissa Sue Clark as joint tenants with right of survivorship. Feeny's signature alone had appeared on the withdrawal slip.

Alissa Sue had come in yesterday, Ollie Deseter said, to draw out money for Feeny's funeral. She was surprised to find the account was closed. Deseter had granted her a loan against the eventual life-insurance settlement.

Wintone thanked Ollie and left, thinking that there was only one likely reason for Feeny to have closed his savings account in the only bank in town. As Betty Ann had claimed, he was planning to leave the area.

The rest of the morning Wintone spent searching Feeny Clark's cabin. He finally found the six hundred dollars in an oilcloth packet tied to the plumbing beneath the sink.

Wintone returned to his office and sat down in the yowling swivel chair. He thought about the scene of Feeny's death, but there was nothing in the memory that shed light. He got up and walked to the table where the rope that had been about Feeny's neck lay, the noose still set at one end. The rope was about three feet long from the bottom of the noose to the end that had been tied about the beam. It had hung down only two feet from the beam, not a long enough drop to kill in the relatively

painless way of competent hangings, by breaking the neck. Instead, Feeny had died a lingering, agonizing death by strangulation. A poor choice of all the ways to leave this world. Wintone figured he'd need both hands to count on his fingers the ways he'd rather die than by choking his life away at the end of a rope.

He sat forward suddenly, his eyes glimmering. As he rose with sudden swiftness from his chair and made for the door, he was smiling.

Twenty minutes later, he was standing on the porch of the Willton house, saying hello to Betty Ann. She squinted up at him from behind the screen door and invited him in. As the door opened and he could see her face more clearly, Wintone noticed the partly blackened eye and the wide welts that crisscrossed her upper arms.

"Your pa home?" he asked.

Betty Ann looked away from him and shook her head. "Pa's in the hospital in Little Rock. He had a heart attack yesterday mornin'."

Wintone inclined his head toward her. "He beat you?"

"'Course he did. Right after's when he had his attack."

"Where are your brothers?"

"Randy an' Eb are in Little Rock too. They been there the last two weeks on a construction job."

"Did any of your men folk know about you and Feeny Clark?"

Betty Ann gingerly touched one of the welts on her left arm and gave an incredulous sneer of laughter. "If'n they had, I'da been beat long afore this."

Wintone knew the Willtons well enough to believe that. "Are you going to be O.K. here alone?" he asked.

She nodded, staring at the bare wood floor. "I'm best off alone now."

Wintone left her and drove back the way he'd come. The Bolton place was on the other side of town. On the way he stopped and talked to Doc Amis, who confirmed that Silas Willton had indeed suffered a heart attack the previous morning and been taken by ambulance to a Little Rock hospital. The two Willton sons had been waiting at the hospital for their father. Wintone said goodbye to Doc Amis, got back in the dusty black cruiser with the sheriff's insignia on each door, and headed up the lake road toward the Bolton house. It was Rodney Bolton he wanted to see.

Jake Bolton told Wintone that Rodney was hunting whatever was in season in the stretch of woods beyond the near rise. Wintone thanked him and set out in that direction.

It didn't take him long to find Rodney; he was no more than ten minutes in the woods when a nearby shot told him in which direction to walk. He called Rodney's name.

"Billy Wintone?" Rodney called back, and stepped from behind a stand of young pine, a shotgun beneath his crooked right arm. Wintone walked over and stood a few feet in front of him. Rodney wasn't a small man, but Wintone seemed to dwarf him. A grey squirrel tittered and scurried away among the pines as if anticipating trouble.

"It had to take two strong men to hoist Feeny Clark up an' hang him," Wintone said calmly.

"Except for a flick of one eye, Rodney didn't move. "Why would you be tellin' me that, Sheriff?"

" 'Cause you was one of 'em. I'm tellin' you I can prove Feeny Clark was murdered, and I'm givin' you the first chance—an' your only chance—to be the one to tell me about it an' get off light as possible. The others'll be in for life sure, an' maybe even get the chair. If you don't talk, I'll just move on to someone else."

The barrel of the shotgun beneath Rodney's arm rose slightly, but continued to point at the ground. Rodney knew that if Billy Wintone said he could prove something, that something could be proved. Wintone didn't bluff, even at cards.

But then neither did Rodney Bolton bluff.

"Let's drive to my office an' you can sign a statement," Wintone said. "But it has to be now."

Desperation, then fear, shadowed Rodney's features. His shotgun had never been so heavy. Wintone was asking him to betray blood kin and giving him a chance for leniency in return.

It took Rodney only a short while to decide. He handed the shotgun to Wintone, and they set out to drive back to the sheriff's office.

It was that kind of world, wasn't it? Rodney was only acting accordingly.

"I want to know how you figured out Feeny was murdered," Rodney said.

"I just added two and two," Wintone told him. "Like always, it came out four. The stool Feeny was supposed to have stood on was two feet high, and after a loop around the beam, the rope and noose was two feet long. Add that up then subtract from the ten feet between the beam and the floor, and that leaves six feet. Feeny was only five foot six. If his neck



was in that noose, he couldn't have touched that stool even with his toes. Somebody must have hoisted him up and hanged him, then tried to make it look like suicide. Two strong men with a sister who had a grudge against him and \$20,000 to gain by his death."

"It damn near worked!" Rodney said in disgust.

"Yep," Wintone agreed. "Given enough rope, you wouldn't have hanged yourselves along with Feeny Clark."



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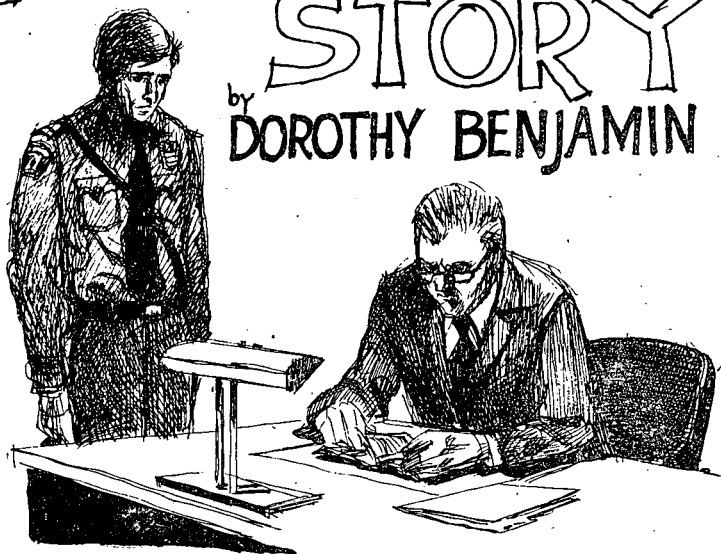
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*An unsolved case rankled Chief Cort . . .*

# THE REAL STORY

by  
DOROTHY BENJAMIN



**C**hief of Police Andrew Cort moved the file folder on his desk, picked up the lone magazine, and opened it to the place marker he had inserted at home. The chief was a big man, solidly built, with close-cropped greying hair. His frown deepened as he read.

To his men Chief Cort was stern, humorless, and demanding. They grumbled frequently about his uncompromising attitude. A number continually complained about the set of rules he had established when he

took charge of the department eighteen months ago: uniforms kept neat and clean and in topnotch condition; carefully written reports turned in without undue delay; no time off from regular duty except for the most urgent of reasons; courteous treatment of the public at all times.

Chief Cort made it clear that neither corruption nor incompetence would be tolerated and that he considered dereliction of duty inexcusable. He was determined to upgrade the department and nothing less than excellence of performance was acceptable to him.

In Chief Cort's opinion the previous chief, who had resigned under fire, had run a sloppy department. The majority of the men had simply enjoyed the lax discipline, but a few had taken advantage of it, and those were generally the ones who complained about the new regime. But even they, if pressed, would concede that Chief Cort was fair. A rule for one was a rule for all.

Like most of his colleagues, Chief Cort felt a keen sense of satisfaction when a difficult case was solved. An unsolved case rankled. He would constantly review the files and pore over reports in search of a clue, however tenuous, which might have escaped earlier notice. Even when pure chance was instrumental in the solving of a case he expressed gratification. He sought no personal glory.

Chief Cort closed the magazine he had been reading and, steeping his fingers, sat in thought for several minutes. Then he flipped on the switch to the intercom. "Send in Officer Brady," he commanded.

Removing his reading glasses, he placed them alongside the folder on his desk and rose. He stretched and walked about the office for a few moments before returning to his desk. His movements were deliberate, but for all his burliness Chief Cort could move quickly when required.

There was a knock on the door and Officer Brady entered, buttoning his jacket. "You wanted to see me, Chief?"

The chief leveled his gaze at Brady and the officer hurriedly completed fastening his uniform.

"Brady, do you recall the Sampson Stamp Shop burglary? I've been reviewing the case." He indicated the folder on his desk.

"It must be at least ten months since the Sampson B-and-E," Brady said.

"You knew the owner of the store quite well, didn't you?"

Brady's manner turned defensive. "You remember what you said, Chief—that we should get acquainted with the people on our beat. You

know—to win their confidence? That way they would be more likely to cooperate, you said, if—”

“I remember what I said, Brady,” the Chief said dryly.

“Well—” Brady pushed out his chin “—yes, sir, I knew the owner, sir.”

Chief Cort’s eyes narrowed but his voice remained even. “I’m right in believing that your hobby is stamp collecting, am I not?”

Officer Brady’s chin eased back.

“Yes, sir.” He became expansive. “It was something to help me relax when I was off duty—you know? I started collecting stamps a couple of years ago.”

“I imagine it takes time to build up a good stamp collection,” Cort said. “I don’t suppose you have a complete collection of any country?”

Officer Brady hesitated. “No, I don’t, sir. Like you say, Chief, it takes time. Money too—something I don’t happen to have a lot of.”

“Who does these days?” the Chief said. “Is there anything in particular you’re collecting in the stamp line, Brady?”

Brady cleared his throat and said guardedly, “Uh, commemoratives. Whatever I can pick up.” His tone quickened. “Old man Sampson used to give me pointers on what to watch out for in a trade. Stuff like centering and imperfect perfs—perforations. He taught me to use mounts to keep my stamps in mint condition. I hinged them at first, which decreases their value.”

“Mr. Sampson seems to have been most helpful to you.”

“Yeah, sir, he was. I was sorry when the old man’s store was hit and he decided to close it up.” Brady shrugged. “Oh, well, I don’t suppose he made much money there anyway.”

Chief Cort’s face darkened. “Very little,” he said curtly. “Mr. Sampson’s daughter told me she often put money into the cash drawer to make her father believe he had done sufficient business to cover his bills. Mrs. Haines did the bookkeeping for her father so Mr. Sampson never had any idea what she was doing.”

“She never told me that,” Brady said petulantly.

The Chief’s voice was sharp. “Any reason why she should?”

“It’s just that I knew her pretty good. Being on the beat and all. I’d have thought she’d have confided in me.”

“A lady’s prerogative, Brady. Tell me—you knew Jonathan Haines, didn’t you?”

"Sampson's grandson?" Officer Brady scowled. "I know him. Punk kid."

Chief Cort raised an eyebrow. "I understand Jonathan Haines installed the burglar alarm system in his grandfather's store and didn't charge Mr. Sampson anything for his work, not even for the parts. And when his grandfather had a prolonged siege of illness, young Haines spelled his mother at the store. Did you know he graduated from journalism school last June with high honors?"

He regarded Brady sternly. "You call *him* a punk kid, Brady? It seems to me the world could do with more punk kids like Jonathan Haines."

"Well, I used to think he was O. K. too, but when I bumped into him on the street a while back he acted real snippy to me." Glancing at the chief, Brady shifted his gaze.

"It could be that Haines is still upset over the burglary," the chief suggested. "He may hold himself responsible for the failure of the alarm system to work when it was needed most."

"Maybe that's it." Brady nodded.

"The stamp album that was stolen contained Sampson's own collection." Chief Cort reached for his eyeglasses and consulted the folder on his desk. "United Nations complete, valued at one thousand dollars. Sampson had brought his collection to the store for safekeeping because of an attempted break-in at a house near his. He was afraid his house might be next. Is that right, Brady?"

"It's all there in my report," Brady replied testily. "I went over the case with you months ago, Chief."

Chief Cort rapped the top of the desk with a pencil. "We're going over it once more, Brady."

He picked up a paper. "According to Jonathan Haines, his grandfather felt certain his collection would be safe in the store because of the burglar alarm. But that very night the store was broken into." Chief Cort peered at Officer Brady over his glasses. "Mr. Sampson showed you the album containing his U.N. collection, didn't he?"

"And who knows how many others he showed it to?" Brady bristled. "What are you trying to prove, Chief? That old man blabbed all over the place about his stamp collection."

"But how many people, Brady, were aware that the stamp album had been brought into the store? Didn't it strike you as odd that the album was stolen the very first night it was there?" Without waiting for an

answer he continued, "As your report states, on your late-evening rounds you found the rear door of Sampson's standing open. The window in the top half of the door had been smashed. You notified headquarters of a possible B-and-E. Within moments of your call the alarm sounded." The chief paused and raised his eyes from the folder. "Sergeant O'Hara was standing near the board and informed me later he was startled that the alarm sounded so quickly after you had called in."

"I don't know about the alarm," Brady said. "I don't know why it malfunctioned. I'm no expert."

"But you're positive it did malfunction."

"What else? That Haines kid didn't do the job right, that's all."

"I want you to think carefully before you answer, Brady. You didn't touch the door—push it or kick it perhaps—so that it might have triggered the alarm although it had failed to go off when the door was broken open?"

"I never touched the door!" Brady's voice rose.

Chief Cort removed his glasses and studied Brady thoughtfully. "You waited until Detectives Coleman and Glen arrived. In the meantime—while you were waiting—you did not touch the door at all? Is that your story, Brady?"

"Exactly what's in my report!"

"I see." Chief Cort adjusted his eyeglasses, placed the folder to one side. "Brady, do you ever read *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*?"

Brady goggled at Chief Cort. "Sure," he said. "I read it sometimes. Why?"

"Have you read the latest issue?"

"No, I haven't."

"You should. You'll find a very interesting story in it that parallels much of the Sampson burglary."

"In the story," he said, "the patrolman on the beat notifies his headquarters that, while making his rounds, he has discovered the rear door of a stamp store standing ajar. He expresses the opinion that it looks like a B-and-E. Then he himself smashes in the window on the rear door with the butt of his gun, reaches in, and opens the door—being careful, of course, not to leave any prints."

"Earlier in the day—" the Chief paused and glanced at Brady "— when the owner of the store showed the album containing his personal stamp collection to the patrolman, the officer made note of where the owner

kept the album, so later the officer doesn't need to waste any time searching for it. He snatches it, hides it in his car, and is waiting at the stamp shop when the detectives arrive."

Chief Cort leaned back in his chair and eyed Brady. "What do you think of the story?"

Brady moistened his lips. "It's a story some writer dreamed up out of his head. You know—writers and their imaginations. It's just coincidence."

"Coincidence?" The chief made a wry face. "*The officer planned the whole thing, Brady.* There was a B-and-E, all right, but it was committed by the patrolman on the beat. Pretty neatly too. He expects the burglar alarm to go off when the door is broken open, so—very cagily—he reports a B-and-E before he has even touched the door, knowing he has only about four or five minutes until reinforcements are due to arrive.

"He breaks open the door, dashes into the store, grabs the stamp album, runs to his car, which is parked close by, and stashes the album. When his colleagues arrive, he is waiting for them at the store, all innocence."

Brady swallowed. "Coincidence," he said.

"Possibly," the Chief said, his mouth tightening, "except for one thing. You'll be interested to learn that the author is Jonathan Haines. Oh, *yes*," he further enlightened Brady. "Mr. Sampson's grandson."

Brady stared at the chief.

"When I read the story I requested Mr. Haines and he said he had written it out of frustration. He has never bought the theory advanced by the police that the burglar alarm malfunctioned when the door was broken open and then went off accidentally afterward."

Cort stood. "And neither do I," he snapped. "I want the truth, Brady. The *real* story this time!"





*Sophie wanted Furberry to give up the banana . . .*

# FURBERRY'S BANANA

M.G.  
FRÖST



I now have the office in the English Department of Poverton College that used to be Furberry's office. The room is not spacious nor particularly well lit, and its decorations are few. One really cannot call framed certificates of degree decorations at all, I suppose, more just professional convention. There is certainly nothing on my wall to match Furberry's banana.

The banana had been a prominent decoration in Professor Furberry's

FURBERRY'S BANANA

45

office, its yellow velour plumpness forming a crescent shape on the wall above his desk, much like that of fighting fish often found in the offices of business executives. It was certainly what people call a "conversation piece."

Neither a fighting fish nor a banana would be appropriate to my walls, for I am not forceful and businesslike, nor am I light-hearted, sophisticated, and a social lion like Furberry. I admit I envied him the bright attentions his suave presence evoked at faculty meetings and parties. I envied the gay repartee that issued from his office when, prodded, he referred to himself as "top banana in the English show" here at Poverton. I envied him the blushing oh-you-naughty-man attentions of visiting females and new office staff.

Repartee about the banana often seemed to bring "naughty man" responses and, once in a while, Professor Furberry would wink at me over the shoulder of some giggling lady as if to say, "We men, Poffering, we men—like old Lord Byron, you know—are dashing devils to be reckoned with!" And I would grin back at him, rather foolishly, I fear, yet feeling for that moment just such a devil indeed.

Furberry encouraged face-to-face speculation about the banana's origin, and he even gave some credence to one behind-the-back one. A lady faculty member, miffed over some disagreement with Furberry, once declared that she expected any day a raid by some angry Carmen Miranda type intent on refurbishing her headpiece. "Close," grinned Furberry when the theory got back to him, "close." Less flattering theories, even if he heard them, he chose to ignore.

The banana, as you see, contributed greatly to Furberry's chosen life style. It had benefits, and yet the possession of such an unusual *objet d'art* can, it seems, lead to certain difficulties.

Furberry's difficulties, at least my first knowledge of them, began one day when I had been working late, grading papers in my little office adjacent to his. Furberry entered the outer office. I was very surprised to see him so late in the afternoon, for his classes were arranged to his liking early in the day; other faculty members being forced to arrange their schedules around his, which was inflexible.

I was surprised too at Furberry's appearance. His hairpiece was just a little askew—obvious—as it seldom was even to his familiars. His face was flushed, and missing was his usual affable, thirty-two-force grin of ivory and gold. He stalked into his office without a word to me (my door

was open and I was in full view) or to Miss Hagachoff, who was always the last to leave the office on any day. Miss Hagachoff looked alarmed and upset, and a few minutes later, when a loud groan was heard within Furberry's sanctum, she got up and nervously but deliberately moved her sensible oxfords toward his door. She didn't get there.

"Stop, Hagachoff! Oh, Hagachoff, do go home! Stop that incessant pencil-pushing and paper-rattling. Out!" said Furberry.

I couldn't see Miss Hagachoff's face, but I could imagine it. When Hagachoff was upset, the thin paleness of her face turned into a ski slope down which her wire-rimmed glasses threatened to plunge as into an abyss. A look at that face did temper Furberry's violence, for I heard the usual suave Furberry saying, "Please, my dear, forgive my harsh words. You work too hard, dear Miss Hagachoff, and you are thoughtful and kind besides. But do go home, to your well earned evening's rest."

"Are you sure? Are you—" Miss Hagachoff's small voice and small protestations faded as Professor Furberry gallantly pressed her handbag and coat upon her and guided her firmly out the door.

The lady out, he turned and faced me. "Oh world, oh life, oh time, Poffering! Oh false womankind! Poffering, never, never marry. Never, never have anything at all to do with women!"

I had hoped to pretend I'd observed nothing and go on grading my papers, but of course, that now was not to be. He advanced into my office (that never happened before) and flopped into the straight-backed visitor's chair in front of my desk (that was incredible). I blinked and tried to find something to say, but that wasn't necessary—a blessing, since I quite often have difficulty synchronizing reaction with speech.

"Poffering, I need a drink," he said. "And I need a bit of companionship. Come on, old boy, leave off the labor and let us adjourn to Paco's. Have you got your car?"

"Well—" I hesitated. I don't drink, but I did have my car.

"Right on, then!" he said without waiting for my answer, and soon we were in my 1964 Fairlane and at a location not far from campus in miles, yet one totally unfamiliar to me. I parked at his direction on the street near a small unprepossessing establishment, over the door of which was stated in as yet unlit neon, PACO'S. I was very nervous. The streetlight on this suspicious-looking street was half a block away, and Furberry hardly waited for me to lock my car door after we stepped out.

It was black in Paco's. Going in was like entering a movie theater out

of bright sunlight. There were low murmurs and clinks of glassware, and a chunk-kachunka noise I later learned came from the pinball machines at the back. Furberly seemed to know his way, and I kept him in earshot, if not in sight, until we slipped into a now twilight booth, my eyesight beginning to return.

Furberly did know the way and the bartender as well, and we soon had two tall Tio Pacos before us. Furberly swallowed long, slumped, and sighed.

"Have you ever been in love, Poffering?" he asked, and as usual didn't pause for an answer. "Sophie, Poffering, thinks love is a once-in-a-lifetime thing, but then—" he hesitated, as if reflecting "—it is, it is 'of man's life a thing apart' and 'woman's whole existence.' Right?"

I dared to sip the drink before me. Its astringent taste and a brief indecision about attempting to speak plus a quick mental chase after the quotation—Byron—all conspired to gag me. I doubled over, coughing, and almost upset the drink.

"Down the wrong way?" said Furberly, but made no saving move. "I wanted to be honest with Sophie," he said.

Now my mind made another search. Oh yes. Sophie Hennington was Professor Hennington's widow. I recalled that I had heard something about Sophie and Furberly going about together, but the private lives of my fellow faculty have never been of much interest to me. Now I recalled the face—and, oh yes, the Opera Guild meeting last year. She had given a little talk, reminiscing about the time John McCormack visited her mother—she had been a mere babe at the time, of course, she had said, and the assembly had laughed politely as she smiled and pushed a bit at the too-red hair framing her Irish face, her charm bracelet jingling pleasantly along with the laughter of the crowd—but less pleasantly, I fear, during the pregnant pauses of the tenor aria which followed her talk.

Furberly continued. "I said, 'Sophie, of course there were others. We are mature people, Sophie. A lovely woman like you is sure to have had love affairs herself.' I guess I should have said a while ago, twice-in-a-lifetime is love to Sophie, for she began to tell me of her late Homer and the real devotion of their love for each other. Oh, Poffering, how that woman talks! Much as I admire her outgoing manner, her *joie de vivre*, I must say that Sophie never lets anyone but herself say anything. 'Harold,' she said, 'there is true love, and there is philandering. I have

seen how ladies flock about you at parties, and I have heard about'”—Furberry paused—“‘about that infamous banana.’”

“Yes,” I said, still not daring another sip of the Tio Paco.

“She wants me to give up my banana! She has even threatened to come in and snatch it off my wall. She suspects—” he leaned forward, whispering “—that it was a gift from a lady.”

“Was it?”

Furberry grinned brightly. “And if it was, Poffering, if it was? No, Poffering, I will not let Sophie take away my banana. Whatever she thinks about it, it is *my* banana. So much for Sophie! A marriage cannot be founded upon such a start.” He took a big swallow of his drink and sat back in the booth as if everything had been unalterably settled. His eyes gleamed with determination and Tio Paco, and although leaning against the midnight plastic booth pushed his hairpiece a little forward he did not notice it.

“Furberry—Harold—” I said, for my own few sips of Paco were making me bold “—is a banana really worth it? I mean, if you and Mrs. Hennington have gone so far as to consider marriage—”

“No!” he thundered at me: “No, no, no! There are other bonnie lassies around. Have you perhaps noticed Miss Lakey, the new teaching assistant in our département? Such a scholarly mind, such damask beauty—”

Indeed I had noticed Miss Lakey and, while she was usually all business, not one to giggle and make conversation, she had been invited to confer in the inner sanctum many times, and I had seen Furberry accompany her solicitously, the two smiling and laughing, to the outer office door, Hagachoff’s pruney disapproval affecting them not a whit.

It was seven P.M. by the blue-lit clock in the bar, and my stomach’s urgings prompted a suggestion to leave. Furberry was unwilling at first, but he yielded, and we made our way at last from twilight within to twilight without. I dropped him at a house across the street from the East Campus. It seemed that he parked his vintage MG in the driveway of Sophie’s abode every day and, as he said, “enjoyed the salutary briskness” of a walk to West Campus, where our offices were located.

Through my rear-view mirror I saw him adjust his black beret and drive off. And did he make a vulgar gesture at the curtained windows of the house’s upper story? Yes, I fear he did.

Our “drinking buddy” relationship, Furberry’s and mine, did not ex-

tend into the next day. Furberly was his old, detached, smoothly sophisticated self, and I was again the forever paper-grading resident of an adjacent box in the English office. The resumed distance between us did not disturb me. I was, in fact, grateful not to be involved in the splintered mosaic of his love life, but I couldn't help noticing that Furberly and Miss Lakey were often together in the hall, in animated conversation over the drinking fountain or paused on a stairway landing for a moment's discourse. And I noticed that the banana remained in its accustomed place on his wall.

In the days to follow, Furberly took to wearing a red rose in his tweedy buttonhole, and—yes, I'm sure of it—he had a new, less treacherous hairpiece. During this time he hummed a good deal and was pleasant enough to Miss Hagachoff, to the student help, Bonnie and Betty, and to me. Thus we were unprepared for the day when his mood suddenly changed.

That day Hagachoff was rudely ordered to bring certain files up to date, the student help was rebuked for bringing their social lives into the office, and several odious teaching assignments were given out for the next term. My assignment was certainly no winner, but I noticed that Miss Lakey's was even worse—a large class of Freshman English students at a particularly inconvenient time of day. Now, in places of more prestige than Poverton College teaching assistants never get anything other than Freshmen to teach, so Miss Lakey's assignment would not be surprising. However, I couldn't help but observe Miss Lakey and young Dr. Rogers together here and there in much the same circumstances as I had earlier observed her and Furberly. In any case, Furberly was in another snit, and he stayed that way, seemingly feeling no obligation to oil the troubled waters this time.

Then one morning I arrived at the office after my ten o'clock class and found everything in an uproar. Miss Hagachoff's glasses had skied lugubriously onto her neatly arranged desk, and she stood white and shaking.

"I—I don't know, Professor—only for a moment was I out of the office—you *know* it was only a moment!"

The furious Furberly turned on me as I entered. "You, Poffering—where is my banana?"

"Ba-ba-nana?" I stuttered.

"My banana is missing. It was there last night, and you and Hagachoff were still here when I left."

I tried to remember. "Yes," I said, "but—"

"Was it here when you left?"

How the hell do I know? was what I wanted to say but I merely murmured, "I don't know." He vented his wrath on me, Miss Hagachoff, and the student help at great length, then angrily left the office.

"Haggy," I finally said—and realized two hours later that while I had used the diminutive affectionately it was not a flattering one—"will you please go to Dr. Rogers' office and ask him for his final roll?"

Miss Hagachoff needed to get out of there and was most grateful for the opportunity.

Following were days of gloom and grey, inside and often out, days of trickling umbrellas and of ill concealed sniffings (Hagachoff's). Furberry was very late to work most days, and cold and curt to all of us.

The first banana missive arrived on a Friday, but I didn't know about it until the Tuesday after when a strange lady stopped me outside Staunton Hall and pressed upon me, suddenly and inexplicably, a package and a letter addressed to Furberry. There were no words spoken, just a collision of umbrellas, and before I could realize the situation she had sloshed away into the crowds of class-bound students.

Bewildered, I made delivery to a seemingly work-absorbed Furberry, who accepted the package without a word and waved me thither—only to come to my door just as I sat down at my desk and, motioning incoherently, and red-faced, indicate that I should follow him back into his office. There, he shut the door.

"Poffering, where did you get this thing?" He indicated a great, green cucumber on his desk. I told Furberry how quickly it had all happened and that the lady was so muffled up against the weather that I couldn't have seen her face even if I'd had the time or wits enough to try.

He pushed the now crumpled-looking letter, *sans* envelope, toward me.

"I understand," it said, "that you advertised in the Craterville *Times* for the return of an object of certain dimensions which, belonging to you, was recently stolen; and I was moved to ameliorate your distress, if I can indeed do so. Is this the purloined object? If it is, I rejoice. Do not try to find me. I desire no reward." It was unsigned.



My evident astonishment must have cleared me of any suspected complicity. Furberry sank dejectedly into his squeakless executive chair (it was, by orders to Hagachoff, kept well oiled). He opened a desk drawer and, with shaking hands, pulled out another paper which he silently gave me.

The message on this one was made of letters evidently cut from the comic strips of a newspaper. "Your BaNANA," it read, "Is IN my CUStoDy You Will bE INFormED IN FUTURE coMMuNicAtionS AS TO the PRice of ITS saFe ReTurn."

"Who, Poffering, is committing this outrage upon my sanity?" moaned Furberry.

I had, of course, no answer, and no answer to that same question when the tape recording came: on which someone, in the dim recesses of the Listening Lab where Furberry led me one evening, sang, "Yes, we have no hmm-hmm-hmms" and "Banana ripe, banana ripe, ripe I cry-y! Full and fair ones, co-o-ome a-a-and buy-y!" The voice, said Furberry, was unfamiliar to him—as it was to me. He cast the offending cartridge into the wastebasket, then retrieved it. His eyes gleamed menacingly and he said, "Deduction—clues. I'll get this robber yet."

"Well," I asked, feeling like Dr. Watson, "who has the motive? Who most dislikes your liking your banana?"

"Sophie! Sophie, of course. And she'd know that wretched eighteenth-century ditty too. But Sophie made it clear that she had no further interest in me whatsoever."

"Nevertheless a *bona fide* suspect. But, Furberry, how about Miss Lakey? How does she feel about—"

Furberry's expression changed from detective glee to bloodhound gloom. "She hated it. Of course, I didn't know at first. Poffering, things had been going so well for us. Well, it was all over the night I took her to the Aztec Room of the Shelton. Over her third champagne cocktail—I was telling her about my college fraternity initiation and old Harry Buller and I riding buses all night without any funds—he had to point to his head and say, 'I'm a cuckoo, I'm a cuckoo!' Hilarious!—anyway, over her third champagne cocktail, she suddenly suggested we go somewhere else. It was called Tonio's. I could hardly enter for the din of that rock-and-roll stuff. I spent the evening trying to drink some poisonous green thing called a Tonio's Tempest, and she—she actually left me sitting alone while she gyrated with a series of young clowns. Oh, it was a terrible

evening, but at least I discovered that Miss Lakey and I could never be close. Common values, Poffering, are essential if two people are to have a meaningful relationship. When I think that I even toyed with the idea of telling her how I came to have the banana—the poignant and meaningful circumstances—” Furberry stopped, grimacing angrily. “No matter. Then and there I cut Miss Lakey out of my life!”

I decided that Miss Lakey was a poor suspect for our thief, unless the teaching assignment she’d been given by Furberry was a source of resentment.

“Professor,” I said, “could Miss Hagachoff have a possible motive?”

“Miss Hagachoff?” He looked amazed.

“I’m just trying to cover all areas which might bring enlightenment. Miss Hagachoff has worked for you for many years. And she’s always been solicitous of your needs and intensely loyal.”

Having so recently rethought the sad affair Lakey, Furberry now settled, smilingly relieved, into the flattering possibility of being the object of Miss Hagachoff’s unrequited love. “Well!” he said, still smiling. Then, shaking his head, “No,” he said. “What you say may be true, Poffering, but this is just not Miss Hagachoff’s style.”

“A student prank, perhaps?”

“Not Bonnie or Betty!”

This time it was I who said no. Betty and Bonnie were serious-minded scholarship students, and I happened to know that they needed their jobs too much to risk playing jokes.

After an hour or so of these conjectures, we left the Listening Lab, Sherlocked-out for the day, more or less agreed that Furberry could only watch and wait for further developments. The comic-strip letter had, after all, promised further developments.

But days and weeks went by and there were none. It began to seem the affair had never been, and we of the English office were rather glad, although I confess a certain sense of anti-climax disturbed me when I thought about the matter.

Furberry was not relieved, however. At first he seemed to be, but then he began asking Miss Hagachoff rather too anxiously about the daily mail. Then one day he stopped me in front of Staunton Hall to ask me if I had seen anyone who might perhaps resemble the lady of the cucumber occurrence. Of course Furberry knew full well the details of that

happening and how I was not able to make any identification. But he made me go over the incident once again: the muffled figure, the umbrella, the color of her clothing, her walk, her jingle—

“Jingle? You say she jingled as she walked away?”

I had amazed myself. The jingle must have been stored somewhere in my subconscious until this moment of recall. Yes, I was sure, there had been a jingle.

“Then it’s Sophie, Poffering! It had to be Sophie and that damned charm bracelet she always wears. Poffering, I am going after my banana. Sophie Hennington has no right to play these demeaning games!” And Furberry walked briskly away in the direction of East Campus.

The next thing I knew, the Furberry-Hennington alliance was on again. Furberry himself volunteered nothing to me, but his mood was cheerful and assured, even as soon as the day after his resolution to confront the wicked Sophie. I finally decided to press the matter. I was, after all, willing or no, involved, if only as consulting detective. I walked into his office—and saw a large picture of Sophie on the wall behind his desk. I asked him flat out what had happened.

Furberry looked uncomfortable. I had the impression he would wish me into the nearest supply cabinet or worse, had he the power. But then he got up and closed the door, waving me into the chair across from him.

“You were all wrong, Poffering. I should have been able to counter your suspicions of Sophie, but distraught as I was—”

My suspicions! But I was too intrigued at that moment to point out to Furberry his gross calumny.

He went on, “Sophie was absolutely broken-hearted that anyone should think that she would steal—that even in her very natural jealousy—” he smiled “—she would take from me an object I so obviously valued.”

“And she cried,” I said.

“Oh, of course she cried. Dear Sophie has such a sensitive soul. We’re to be married next week, Poffering, and you must come to the wedding. Dr. Heinrich—you know, the eighteenth-century scholar who is retiring as head of the English Department at Coppershaw University?—has consented to be my best man. You may as well know now, Poffering, that he has named me as his successor at Coppershaw, and Sophie and I will be leaving for the new campus very soon after the wedding. A great man, Heinrich. Have you read his ‘On the Nature of the Comma in Keats?’”

I shook my head and found myself being escorted out Furberry's door, the topic of Sophie obviously curtailed.

The topic of banana was likewise terminated. It came up briefly at the faculty's "Farewell, Furberries" party. Someone—did I see Bonnie and Betty exchange conspiratorial smiles?—furnished a great banana cream pie as part of the refreshments. I think Furberry looked a little shocked at the first forkful, as his tastebuds recognized that characteristic mellow flavor, but all remained jolly and merry. Furberry prattled and punned, and Sophie was grace and vivaciousness personified. She was even nice to me. I had suspected that Furberry had made me the villain of their estrangement, but Sophie seemed to have no hard feelings. I said the conventional things to her, and was surprised at her warm response, a reaction no doubt kindled by the Cold Duck then flowing freely.

As we talked, she leaned toward me a bit unsteadily, and a glass of the Cold Duck spilled onto the front of my best suit. "Oh, my!" she said, "oh, dear, I'm so sorry!" And she began brushing me with one of those paper napkins that quickly disintegrate into distasteful white fuzz. As she wiped, she jingled. She jingled as always, and this time the jingle's source, her heavily laden charm bracelet, fell at my feet. With no little bumping of heads and undignified scrambling, I retrieved it for her.

"Oh, my," she said, as she tried a bit unsteadily to stand, "that bracelet is such a trouble, but it was a gift from—oh, Professor Poffering, I would take losing it as a very symbolic loss." She leaned forward, whispering. "Harold is sush, *such* a jealous man, you know. This is a collection of my life's experiences. Giving it up will be like giving up a part of myself, but Harold gets absoluly, *absolutely* green." She giggled a little, and in the process of opening her bag to stow the bracelet away, she dropped it again.

I was glad that she did. I was becoming embarrassed by Mrs. Furberry's indisposition, and was glad to pick it up and focus my attention on it instead of on her fumbblings. In retrieving it, I noticed some of the charms hanging from it: a wee mortarboard, a heart with a diamond in the center, a replica of the Eiffel Tower—

"Thank you," she said as she took the bracelet from me. "How good it is to be with old friends as Harold and I begin a new life."

As a matter of fact, it was a new life beginning for me also. I am enjoying Furberry's former office that is now mine. I am even beginning

to think about how I may decorate it. I think now and then also about how Furberry now decorates his. Sophie no doubt helps him with the interior design. I am sure there is no banana, but I am equally sure that Sophie, true to implied resolve, no longer clinks nor jangles.

As Miss Hagachoff brings me my morning coffee and as I swing pleasantly in my squeakless chair, I think, Farewell, Furberry. You have lost and you have gained. You will never see your purloined property again, and are now perhaps glad of it. May you also, Furberry, never see that charm bracelet again—mercifully never see what I saw as I held it in my hand that evening. For among your lady's bangle's shining and cacophonous penduli, hiding between the cunning treble-clef and the tiny American flag, hangs a brightly gleaming golden banana.

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HOG214

*Willard was delighted to learn Myra was a bank teller . . .*

# DREAM

# HEIST

by

CARROLL  
MAYERS



The steady drumming of rain against his bedroom window awakened Willard Coyle that morning. A smile quirked his lips as he recognized the sound and roused fully. A stormy day was an intangible he'd hoped for because conceivably it could mean fewer patrons in the bank at the zero hour, which in turn could boost Myra Flanders' morale.

Shaving, Coyle regarded his reflected features with approval. Lean, dark, no blemishes. Yes, he had the looks, all right. Plus the shrewd

acuity of a born opportunist and an offbeat suavity that most women found charming. Captivating Myra had been simple. Essentially introverted and not particularly pretty, the girl obviously had been starved for male attention.

A casual noon-hour exchange, initiated in a gift shop where Myra had been purchasing a cutlery set and he had been idly estimating shoplifting possibilities, had been cultivated by Coyle on the spot when the girl had mentioned her position as a teller at Manufacturers' Trust. A bit of lunch together had been genteelly broached and hesitantly accepted. From then on, a series of dates had followed smoothly. If not fully in love, Myra Flanders was nonetheless in a state of blissful, pliant euphoria.

Not that Coyle had envisioned any particular caper at first. But a love-starved girl with ready access to large sums of money suggested some ploy to be duly pondered.

Dressed, Coyle checked the time. Eight-twenty. Recalling Myra's nervousness the evening before, he decided a call of reassurance would be wise.

"Hello?"

"It's me, honey."

"Oh, Willard—"

Myra's voice had a wavering timbre. He pressed quickly. "Is something wrong?"

"I—I don't think I can do it."

Coyle's jawline set. She wasn't backing out now. "Nonsense," he said. "You'll do fine."

Her voice still shook. "I don't know, Willard. I just don't know."

Coyle let his words take on an aggrieved edge. "You wouldn't have any doubts if you really loved me."

"But I do! You know I do!"

He smiled at the phone. "Then prove it, darling," he said. "You won't regret it, I promise."

Myra's intake of breath was almost a sob. After a long moment she answered him.

"All right."

He said, "That's my girl. I'll make it ten o'clock sharp." He hung up and checked his pocket to make certain he had the holdup note. He'd printed it in crude block letters on a slip of yellow scratch paper:

I HAVE A GUN. I AM DESPERATE. FILL THIS BAG WITH MONEY. IF YOU SCREAM OR SOUND AN ALARM I WILL KILL YOU.

Practically every week there was an item on the news about a lone bandit boldly presenting a similar missive to a bank teller, only to be foiled and captured when the teller refused to be intimidated and sounded an alarm.

But—as Coyle's diligent pondering of his relationship with Myra Flanders had finally evolved—if that teller had been in on the heist; if, in fact, he or she had filled his accomplice's bag as though merely completing a routine business transaction like a payroll; and if he or she had delayed alerting any of the bank personnel or pressing the alarm until after his or her accomplice had safely departed, at which time he or she had professed abject fright as the reason for his or her inaction and had shown the holdup note as "proof"—

For the next hour, Coyle relaxed, smoking leisurely. He was satisfied Myra would follow the script through without deviation. He had first mentioned the plan one evening after the theater, when they'd visited an intimate little side-street cafe. He'd kept his tone casual, but his fingers closed warmly over Myra's and his gaze stressed deep regard. Visibly affected, Myra still had expressed shocked disbelief.

"You can't be serious!"

"But I am. It would let us start a whole new life together. Think of it: Paris, Rome—all those places you've told me you've dreamed about."

"But not that way!"

"Honey, the bank wouldn't lose a penny. They're insured. And we'd have a small fortune—"

"But something could happen. You could get hurt."

Coyle's fingers interlaced tighter on hers. "No," he assured her. "That's the beauty of it. Nobody would get hurt. You'd just wait a few seconds until I'd left, then pretend to faint. By the time they'd revived you I'd be blocks away. You'd show them the note, say you fainted from the reaction and were too frightened to press the alarm."

He built a wry smile. "If you appeared truly shocked they might even let you take the rest of the day off to recover." His smile warmed. "I'll be at your place waiting with the plane tickets."

"Oh, Willard, please don't ask me to do it!"



"It's our future, Myra. I'm talking about us."

Her lips trembled. "I'll have to think about it," she pleaded.

"Of course." Coyle gave her hand a final squeeze. "Think about our happiness."

Once the seed had been planted and adroitly nourished, Coyle held no doubt of its fruition. Three nights later, Myra capitulated. The fact that she had at intervals appeared uncertain did not deter Coyle. The girl was obviously hopelessly smitten with him. She would act out the charade.

At nine-thirty, Coyle stubbed out his cigarette, collected a small flight bag, and left the apartment. The weather continued inclement and the bank was some twelve blocks distant. He hailed a taxi.

It was ten o'clock exactly when he walked into the bank. Pleased to be precisely on schedule, Coyle was even more gratified to note the rain had curtailed the morning's activities. There were but two patrons at the moment, neither of whom were at Myra's station.

Casually, he approached Myra, passed her the flight bag and the demand note. She did not look at him, but a tic was pulsing in her cheek and her hands shook as she stuffed money packets into the bag.

A ripple of concern coursed through Coyle. If, after all his planning and nourishment, Myra cracked, went to pieces—

"Easy!" Coyle's lips were taut with the whisper. "Easy!"

Myra still did not glance at him or speak, but she managed to get herself in hand. In another moment she returned the bag to him.

Exultation surged through Coyle. He moved briskly, but without undue haste, to the exit. The uniformed guard on duty evinced no interest in him and Coyle reached the street without incident. Another cab answered his wave.

A half hour later, excused for the balance of the day as Coyle had intimated, Myra also flagged a cab. The trip to her modest midtown apartment was brief, but for Myra it was an eternity. She saw little of the traffic. Her mind was a maelstrom of conflicting emotions. Paying off the cabbie, her chest constricted, her palms were slick. This was the moment of truth, the moment she desperately feared.

Coyle was not in the apartment.

For several agonizing pulse beats, Myra stood transfixed. Then, slowly,

with tremendous effort, she forced herself to sit down. In her heart of hearts she had known this was how it would end. Coyle's professed love had been feigned. From that first fatal day he'd used her, manipulated her to acquire the small fortune that would assure "their" future, and then ditched her to fly off to wherever his whim fancied.

Her plain features tight and vacant, Myra stared out the window at the rain.

At the airport, Coyle's suavity deserted him and his emotions turned riotous when he saw the contingency tactic Myra would have undone prior to their boarding had he played the scenario straight.

His protests died in his throat as officials opened the flight bag and discovered \$53,000 with the bank's identifying wrappers still intact. Crammed in between the bills were the two gleaming steak knives that had tripped off the security gate's metal-detection system.

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AHMM7/16

*She and her customers liked pretty things . . .*

# THE LAST QUARTER

by

MARY BRAUND



The Indian appeared in the shop doorway for the third time that week. The dirty unwashed drunken stench of him drifted in through the open door. Caroline threw down her dusting mop, the one with curling chicken feathers, in exasperation. He did not alarm her—he was too incapably drunk to be of any harm to anyone—but he was becoming an embarrassing nuisance. He braced his two arms against the doorjamb in an effort to hold himself steady and swayed backward and forward between his out-

stretched arms, his legs barely holding him upright. He forced his swollen lips open into an agonizing semblance of a smile and the broken brown teeth were a sickening sight.

"Lady," he exhaled, his voice cracked and hoarse, his eyes swivelling as separate entities to get her into focus. "Got a quarter, lady? I jus' need a quarter." The same old line.

"Go away." Caroline spoke up firmly. "Go away and don't come back." Which is what she had said before.

"Jus' a quarter, lady. Tha's all I need. Please, lady."

"No! I haven't got any money with me." That wasn't true, of course, but give him anything and he would just keep coming back. Though he seemed to be becoming a regular fixture without any encouragement, in any case. Thank heavens there had never as yet been any customers in the shop when he made his morning rounds.

She picked up the dust mop and took one step toward him. He flinched from her as though he expected her to hit him, but she wouldn't have gone any nearer to him because the sight and smell of him disgusted her. It escaped her understanding how anyone could be in such a stupor at ten o'clock in the morning. She thought of the cheap liquor circulating in his veins and shuddered. He really couldn't be much older than she was herself, though it was difficult to judge his age from the ravages of alcohol and the way his body did not belong inside the assorted ragbag of clothes that hung on him. His hair was black, greasy, and spiky, sticking up around his head absurdly as though he had tried to cut it himself, but, oddly, it was the hair that shafted a small sense of pity through her because it seemed as though sometime he had attempted to make himself presentable.

She stifled the feeling quickly. He was bad for business and she had to get rid of him. Quickly. Where he ate, how he slept, what he did with himself all day long were of no concern to her.

"Jus' a quarter, lady," he mumbled, knowing it was a lost cause, and then he backed away as she waved the dust mop at him, losing his hold on the door and staggering backward into the street, reeling and sagging inside the legs of his tattered pants. She watched him move away, swaying, setting his feet down carefully as if the sidewalk were hot, moving one leg after the other in an enormous effort. She could hear him mumbling to himself as he passed from her sight in search of better pickings, and she allowed herself a deep breath of relief.

Poor devil, she said to herself. He was a human being, after all, wasn't he? Poor sick creature. Why didn't someone take care of him?

Who that should be she didn't know and hadn't the time to care. She had work to do. Dust the furniture, clean the brass and copper, arrange the flowers in the old cut-glass pitcher, make the shop look enticing and attractive to anyone coming in search of an antique. She rubbed a little lavender-scented polish on a dark oak table. The patina of a hundred years needed no enhancement, but the sweet smell of it pleased her and would please a potential customer.

They would drift in soon, the odd bored housewife, the young couple in search of a special piece, the businessman looking for something different as a present for his wife or girl friend. Caroline had not been in the business long enough to judge which of them might buy something, but she welcomed most of the people who came in, anyone that looked respectable or interested. Most of all, she liked the people who would stop and chat and allow her to show her most prized pieces, because she wasn't in the antique trade just to make money but also because she liked the look and feel of old, pretty things.

There were one or two special pieces in the shop and she lingered over them as she busied herself—an intricately inlaid sewing box, a miracle of tiny drawers with ivory knobs, the soft blue velvet of the lining worn with the passage of years; a fine beveled mirror, the frame a splendor of carved and gilded wood; a collection of delicate, fragile oil lamps, each one different in the curve and color of its glass.

Caroline hummed to herself and forgot the Indian. A peace and stillness descended over the room. It was more like a room than a shop, with the fine old furniture and the paintings on the walls and the sun slanting in through the windows, glinting off the silver and the brass and striking prisms in the beveling of the mirrors.

It was a quiet day. Only a few customers came in, and nobody bought anything. But Caroline didn't mind. The shop was new in this part of town, a recently upgraded area, the old buildings saved from the swinging iron ball of the demolishers, pushing back at the urban blight. People didn't know about the shop yet—it was tucked away in an obscure corner, not on the normal path of passersby—but she had every confidence that she would win a regular clientele in time. As long as she made enough to pay the rent for these first few months she would be content, and this month she had already achieved that.

She altered the ornate brass hands of the grandfather clock and then checked the other clocks, the little brass carriage clock ticking gently inside the glass showcase, the funny painted wall clock that had a habit of speeding up suddenly for no discernible reason.

There was the usual small post-lunchtime flurry of customers, girls on their way back to the office, one who toyed for five minutes over a gold pin and then decided against buying it, two women with packages who compared Caroline's stock with what they had in their own homes, a man looking for Oriental objects Caroline did not have. Then the afternoon drifted into silence. She wrote a letter to her mother. The sun disappeared behind a cloud and the colors of the shop dulled down to a brown monotone.

Caroline began to feel bored. She glanced at the grandfather clock to check the time—maybe she would close early today—then realized that it had ceased its somnolent ticking and remembered that it should have been wound today. Friday was the day to wind the grandfather clock.

In the distance she heard the sound of raucous voices and knew with a sinking of her heart that the drunks were back, ensconced on their favorite patch of grass under the linden tree around the corner. If she closed the shop now she would have to pass them, hear their ribald comments and their pleas for money. She got up to close the door, to shut out the sounds of their drunken revelry.

So she was glad when she turned around from the tallcase clock to see a young man enter the shop. She had not heard him come in, his tennis shoes making no sound on the Persian runner, the tiny bell fixed above the door unaccountably silent.

"Hi," she said cheerfully, closing the clock door with care, hoping he would stay long enough so that the drunks would have moved on their mysterious way before she left.

"Hi," he replied, equally cheerful, and here she could recognize someone about her own age—a tall, slender young man in clean blue jeans and a T-shirt, her own uniform when she was not in the shop. His hair was light brown, cut casually but carefully, waving down onto the nape of his neck, his sideburns just the right length below his ears. He was one of her own kind, someone she could identify with. Not like the Indian. The only different thing about him was the arm encased in plaster he carried against his chest tenderly.

"You've hurt your arm," she said, making conversation.

He looked down at his arm as if in surprise. "Oh, yeah. Yeah, I did. It's no problem though."

She couldn't think of anything else to say and stood quietly by the clock as he meandered his way around the room. The sounds of the men down the road crept in through the door.

"Funny thing about this town," the young man said, inclining his head toward the noise. "Where I come from they'd run bums like that off the streets. They don't let scum like that litter up the town, especially where there are tourists."

"Oh? Where do you come from?"

"Pasadena," he said. "Yeah, in Pasadena we don't allow them to run around free."

Caroline thought about that for a moment. "What do you do with them, then?"

He shrugged. "Lock 'em up for the night, then send them on their way. Especially Indians. We don't have any time for that sort of scum there."

She didn't know why she should disagree with him. "But this is their town. There isn't anywhere else to send them."

He didn't answer that. He stood looking at the painted clock.

"That's fast," he said.

"I know. It doesn't seem to want to keep the slow pace of this city."

He grinned. He had white even teeth. "I know what you mean." He wandered away from the clock, fingered one of the small tables. "You have some nice things." He spoke softly, almost in a whisper.

"I'll show you something nice," Caroline said. She wanted the drunks gone before this young man, though instinct told her he would not be a buyer. He looked as though he had come in just to pass the time of day. His movements were desultory, somehow aimless. She moved over to her favorite piece, the sewing box.

"Look," she said, running her hand over the multi-colored inlay of the lid. "Look at this. And then—" She opened the box, revealing the blue velvet and the row of ivory knobs. She lifted one piece of it and the carved spool holders appeared under her hand. "And then—" she felt like a conjurer "—then this—" She pulled at the center rectangle of velvet to show the tiny drawers underneath, each inlaid, each with its own tiny ivory pull. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asked, opening each minute drawer in turn until they lay tier upon tier like stairs in a dollhouse.

"What is it?" He reached out with his free hand to touch the box.

"A sewing box. Not very practical nowadays, I suppose, but can't you just imagine some Victorian lady in a crinoline sitting at this and making wonderful embroidery?"

He stood and looked at the box for a long moment. Then he looked at Caroline. His eyes were a curious smoky-grey.

"Are you psychic?" he asked in that soft sibilant whisper.

Caroline didn't know why that question should startle her. "Psychic?"

"You talk about it as though it were a living thing. You have a strange empathy with these old things."

"No, I'm not psychic." Caroline did not like the word; it sent an uncomfortable shiver down the back of her neck. "I just like old things."

"You like mirrors too," he said. "I can see that." He turned to look at the mirrors hanging on the walls. "Strange things, mirrors."

"Strange? Why strange?" She let go of the sewing box and folded her arms against her body. The tiny shiver had not left her spine.

"I don't like them," he said. "Especially old ones. If I look in them it is as though there are a thousand other faces crowding over my shoulder, looking at me from the past. Do you ever feel like that?"

Caroline shook her head. She started to move away from him, nearer the door. He was a head taller than she and he held the stiff plastered arm at such an odd angle. He moved with her.

"No," she said clearly, loudly. "No, I don't believe there is anyone else there. I couldn't believe that or I wouldn't be able to live with them, would I?"

"I couldn't keep a house like this," he said, and moved a step closer. "I would be haunted. Do you ever feel haunted?"

Caroline shook her head again, hard. She didn't want to take her eyes from his face, but neither did she want to look at him. People had odd fancies.

"This isn't a house," she said. "It's a shop, just a shop. I sell things. They're not mine to keep."

"It reminds me of a house. Like an old aunt's I had once. She's dead now, of course. And it reminds me of my mother's house too. She liked old things, not young ones. She didn't like children, not even her own." He smiled, showing the perfect white teeth, and the smoky eyes settled on Caroline. "She's dead too."

Caroline avoided his eyes. She edged behind an old chair. He was still



between her and the door. "I'm sorry," she said, and her voice echoed thinly in the still shop.

"Sorry?" He sounded surprised again, as he had when she had asked about his arm. He drew his free hand across his head. "Sorry for what?"

Now Caroline was finding it difficult to speak. "Sorry that your mother is—dead." Her voice trailed away.

"Oh." He laughed, a curious, soft sound. "There's no need to be. I didn't like the mirrors though. I smashed them all after she died." He looked puzzled, pursing his lips in a tight line. "Or was it before she died? I forget now—funny how one forgets, isn't it?"

Caroline nodded silently. The street was abnormally quiet outside. Then suddenly there was a brief burst of laughter from the men around the corner and the sound of breaking glass.

She cleared her throat. "It sounds as if the drunks are having a good time out there."

She tried to smile.

"Scum!" He spat the word out.

"I should go and see if they're doing any damage." She started from behind the chair.

"No!" He held up the plastered arm. "No! Don't go! I like to talk to you." His voice was louder now. "I'm sure you're psychic."

Dear God, yes, maybe I am, Caroline thought. She watched the arm in its hard casing. A weapon. He will use it—I can see far enough into the future for that. Will it be me or my mirrors or my little glass lamps? Inadvertently she let her eyes slide toward the precious subjects. She wasn't sure what she had more fear for, and his eyes followed hers.

"Those are nice," he said conversationally. "I once knew someone who had lamps like that. She was psychic too. This room reminds me of her house."

Yes, and I'll bet she's dead too, Caroline thought. Her heart was beating in her throat. He moved toward the lamps and Caroline moved in the opposite direction, toward the door. He immediately stopped. The door was a long way off. She leaned on the back of the chair for support and attempted to keep her voice normal.

"Tell me about her," she said.

It was as though she had turned on a tap. The words flooded from him, the soft whispering back again. She half listened, not wanting to, wanting to find a way to fly to the door, measuring the distance, seeking a clear

path through all the bric-a-brac that cluttered the path and yet knowing she had to appear to be listening to him. The diffuse pale eyes kept fixing themselves on her face and she forced herself to listen, to keep his attention on what he was saying.

"She was tall," he was whispering. "Blonde, like you, but older, much older, and after we went to this seance kind of meeting she took me back to show me all her lamps. She lit them, one by one, until they were flaring up, blinding me, you know—too bright. Too much light is bad for the eyes, did you know that? And I had to put them out because I don't like too much light, or fire. Do you like fire, do you think—" His words were suddenly stemmed by the sound of the painted clock on the wall, chasing time again, striking stridently through the sound of his voice, stilling it. They both listened to the clanging bell ring five times. Five o'clock. Closing time.

He stared at the clock. "I don't like clocks that strike," he said, and Caroline closed her eyes briefly. Clocks that strike and mirrors that reflect the past and lamps that burn too brightly. She opened her eyes quickly, because it was dangerous to keep them closed. Now the young man with the weapon of his arm was swinging it from side to side. His eyes slid from Caroline to the clock to the mirrors to the lamps and back to Caroline again.

There's nothing I can do to stop him, she panicked, nothing . . .

The door swung open.

"Lady, got a quarter? Jus' a quarter?"

He swayed in the doorway, as drunk as he had been at ten o'clock in the morning, as rank and as evil-smelling as he had been when she last saw him, his black hair spikier and wilder, his broken brown teeth still bared in the travesty of a smile, and he was the sweetest thing Caroline had ever seen. The stale urine smell wafted from him over the lavender-scented polish and the brass polish and the perfume of the roses in the cut-glass pitcher.

"Oh," Caroline said. "Sure, just a minute."

The young man turned on the Indian, his face contorted. "Scum!" he screamed. "Filthy, dirty, rotten scum!"

He leapt for him, covering the few yards between himself and the doorway, scattering the chairs and stools and copper coal scuttle, and struck the swaying figure across the face with the full force of his plaster-of-Paris arm, sending the unaware man hurtling backward onto the side-

walk, the blood spurting from his lips, those poor swollen lips, the crunch of his head hitting the concrete, a sickening sound.

For a moment he stood over him, hitting again and again with the arm at the still figure, kicking with the frenzy of the madman that he was. "Scum!" he screamed. "You should be taken off the streets! Put away!" Then he ran, like a well trained sprinter, the graceful tall shape of him disappearing round the corner in his clean blue jeans and white T-shirt, the arm held close against his chest.

Caroline bent over the Indian. Blood trickled from the greasy hair, oozing onto the pavement, seeping down into the neck of the shirt that could never have belonged to him. She picked up the limp hand stretched out in eternal supplication, the nails broken, dirty. She pressed it close to her face, unaware now of the smell.

"Thank you, thank you for coming back." She didn't know what else to say. The eyes had ceased their wanderings, were fixed on the sky. Caroline started to cry.

She fumbled in her pocket, where she always kept some loose change, and, finding a quarter through the tears, she closed the Indian's hand around it. She only dimly heard the siren of the aid car screaming in the distance.

When they picked the body up off the sidewalk the quarter fell to the ground with a tiny tinny sound.

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# LETTERS



I liked Ernest Savage's story, "The Attaché Case," in the April 23 issue of AHMM. But there was something in it that I didn't understand. Tim's car is referred to as a "slant-six." What does that mean? Is it a style of car?

Marybeth Holwell  
Duluth, Minnesota

*The slant-six is a six-cylinder engine developed by Chrysler-Plymouth in 1964 and used in Plymouth cars. The "slant" refers to the way the cylinders ride in the engine; a V-8 engine is eight cylinders in a V-shape, so a slant-six is six cylinders in a single diagonal line, or slant.—S.C.G.*

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Would you know if Jack Ritchie plans to write any more stories about Detective Cardula? If you are in contact with him, tell him Cardula has one sure fan.

Marshall Pierce  
Natick, Massachusetts

*Mr. Ritchie, take note!—S.C.G.*

Can you help me get some information regarding Sexton Blake? He is mentioned in passing in a few mysteries I have read but I can find nothing in the library facilities available to me. All I can gather is that he's a very early English detective.

Kay K. Stauffer  
Alhambra, California

*Sexton Blake is a British detective character created by Harry Blyth. The author used the pseudonym Hal Meredith in the early stories, the first of which, "The Missing Millionaire," was published in 1893 in a boys' weekly paper called The Halfpenny Marvel. Blake began as an imitation of Sherlock Holmes and even moved to Baker Street after a while. There have been about 4,000 stories about Blake written by nearly 200 authors, according to Chris Steinbrunner and Otto Penzler's Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection (McGraw-Hill, 1976). See the Encyclopedia for further details—S.C.G.*

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While the general level of stories in AHMM is reasonably high, I wish to draw your attention to something I believe you should be wary of in the future. I speak about "Murder Method" by Talmage Powell in the January (30), 1980 issue. Not only does the author make reference to a woman belonging to her husband, but he refers to it as being "the ultimate purpose of womanhood." This is not only patently ridiculous in its sexism, but it is doubly reprehensible when appearing in a publication edited by a woman. Had the story been a reprint from twenty years ago, your allowing such a statement to pass would be understandable.

Aaron Cohen  
New York, New York

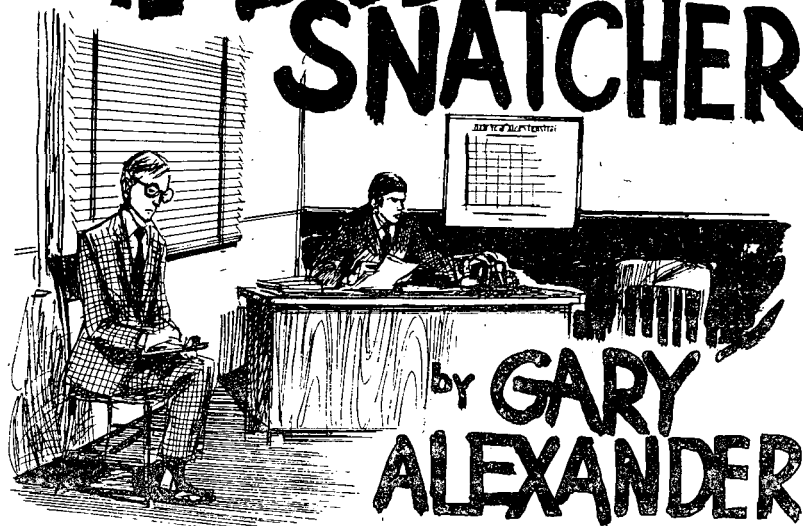
*We are now including reprints from time to time in AHMM. They are identifiable by the year of copyright following the story. The Powell story was first published in 1960, exactly twenty years ago.—S.C.G.*

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*Questions, comments, or suggestions about the magazine or the mystery field? Write to: Susan Calderella Groarke, Letters Editor, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.*

*Since Malonson's murder, DataAid was in big trouble . . .*

# THE BODY SNATCHER



by **GARY  
ALEXANDER**

"I feel almost disrespectful, Mr. Webber, coming to you so soon after Jerry Malonson's passing," Evan Neale said grimly. "I realize it's only been a week, but I'm desperate for another finance vice-president. To say things are chaotic now would be a gross understatement."

"I understand," Blair Webber said. He too knew of Jerry Malonson's "passing." The newspapers reported that Malonson had been stabbed at least ten times more than necessary to send him to corporate Valhalla.

Since Malonson's apartment had been ransacked and cash valuables were missing; the police chalked up the unsolved crime to a burglar with a mean streak.

"For obvious reasons, I would like you to handle it for me," Neale continued.

For obvious reasons. Webber, owner of Webber and Associates, Inc., Selective Executive Recruitment, had placed Evan Neale in his present position as president of DataAid, Inc., a computer-service firm specializing in accounting, tax preparation, and word processing. In the two years of Neale's reign, DataAid had thrived. Their board of directors was happy, and Blair Webber was happy; the fee for placing Neale had been his first large one after striking out on his own.

Webber studied the form Neale had completed. "You're asking for a candidate with both a CPA and extensive technical knowledge in computers. *And* management experience. You're tossing me a tough one, Mr. Neale."

Neale was a large man with grey hair. He talked with his hands. "Perhaps, but those are my requirements. The computer industry is changing so rapidly that technical expertise is essential. Naturally, cost is no problem if you deliver and deliver fast. There will be a nice bonus added to your standard fee if you can produce within a week. Relocation is no problem either, if he's the right man."

Webber nodded. That would make an impossible task slightly less difficult. Some corporations balked at repotting an executive from the East Coast because of the moving expense and other perk demands. "Well, that widens the playing field a bit, but still—"

Neale got up and smiled. "I have confidence in you, Webber. I appreciate what you've done for me in the past and I like the way you've kept your operation small and personal. If there's a better body snatcher on the Coast, I don't know who it is."

Webber forced a return smile, shuddering inside. Body snatcher, head hunter—phrases coined by bitter employers who had lost key people when better opportunities had been presented to them. But it was a matter of perspective, Webber knew—whether your corporation was victim or beneficiary.

He slipped out of Neale's handshake after the first squeeze. A wiry, natty man half Neale's size, he had learned the hard way that Neale didn't mind showing off his knuckle-crunching grip.

"I hope to get back to you in about three days," he said.

Neale winked. "Think bonus, Webber. Forty-eight hours would be appreciated."

Webber struck out locally and got on the phone. He had a loose working relationship with similar small firms in most major markets. It was a necessary symbiosis if he was to survive against the increasing number of large operations in the field. Perhaps Neale's "small and personal" grated him even more than the "body snatcher" remark. Blair Webber did not want to remain small and personal forever. He would prefer to become ponderous and wealthy. But his income was about the same as it had been when he had resigned his position as a corporate personnel manager to hang out his shingle; his was no overnight-success saga.

He wished he could have sold Neale on a generic comptroller. There were literally thousands of them pounding the bricks, *Wall Street Journals* tucked under their arms. But an accountant who was also an engineer-scientist-manager? Webber wasn't exactly sure why Neale had demanded this combination, since he had no knowledge of computers himself, but, as they said, the customer is always right.

Twelve working hours and a \$700 deficit to Ma Bell later, Webber had gleaned a sum total of two prospects. The first held a high-level position in Philadelphia and seemed, if anything, overqualified. He must have thought his talents and experience put him in the same rare category as Julius Erving—his salary demand was twice Neale's limit. The second, a younger man from Denver, had the proper education—an electronics-engineering degree with a minor in accounting, and he was studying for his CPA—but he was ground-floor management with a concern much smaller than DataAid. A tad shaky, but he was Webber's only possibility.

Webber called Neale and gave him a thumbnail description of the Denver man, coming down heavily on his potential and Neale's chance to sign on a moldable commodity cheap. Neale was only mildly enthusiastic, but he agreed to an interview. Webber set up a conference call to Denver while Neale's secretary scouted airline schedules. The conversation was brief, but it went well and Neale wired the prospect a ticket.

Webber was uneasy. If it worked out, it would be too simple. Five-digit fees did not normally materialize after a day or two on the telephone.



Usually it required a lengthy and complex series of meetings and dinners, a good deal of hand-holding, and intense sales talks to two parties whose needs and desires were not always compatible.

He was right.

"You shipped me a goddamn space cadet," Neale bellowed into the receiver.

"Settle down, Evan. What's wrong?" Webber had never been comfortable with Neale on a first-name basis, but he hoped it would have a soothing effect.

"For starters, he's just a kid. He probably shaves with whipped cream and a cat's tongue. And the first thing he wants to know is *my* relationship with the community and whether we have an affirmative action program that's *meaningful*! I thought he was going to ask if we dumped our garbage in the river! He didn't even get to salary and fringies before I'd booked him back to Denver. I'm very disappointed, Webber."

"There's a limit to what we can learn in a hurry, Evan. Your case is my first priority, I assure you. I recognize your urgency. But you must realize that what we're trying to accomplish is slightly more difficult than sending a warm body out of the union hall with a slip of paper."

Neale lowered his voice. "I know, I know. But things are coming down around my head here ever since Jerry . . . Well, just do your best, Webber."

"I'll be back to you soon," Webber promised, knowing it was probably a lie. He hated to lose a good fee, but with his limited resources he couldn't search indefinitely for a two-legged Holy Grail.

The next morning a weedy little man in a checkered suit and horn-rimmed glasses walked into Webber's office. Since his secretary had gone out for coffee, Webber was stuck with him.

"May I apply for a job here?" the man asked.

Webber lacked the heart to explain that he dealt primarily with employers, not people off the street, and at a level somewhat higher than this fellow's appearance indicated. There were scores of employment agencies in town, but evidently this man's delusions had led his fingers to walk the yellow pages from EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES to EXECUTIVE SEARCH CONSULTANTS. Webber gave him an application, which the man—Walter J. Heupel—completed quickly.

Webber glanced at it. "We'll keep you in mind if anything turns up."

Later, sorting through miscellaneous papers on his desk, Webber came across Walter J. Heupel's application. It had been a slow day, so he studied it.

Walter J. Heupel not only had a degree in electronics engineering, he also had an MBA and a CPA. He had management experience too, at a company like DataAid. His past three years were unaccounted for, but Webber was so excited he didn't worry about it. That gap could be filled in later. He didn't see bright sunlight at the end of the tunnel, but he could distinguish shadows and fuzzy images. He called Neale, then Heupel, and arranged dinner for the three of them at a plush restaurant. He would ride shotgun and hoped Heupel was what he claimed, instead of what he seemed.

The veal was young, the wine old, the service slow and haughty. But Webber already had so much invested in the project that a larcenous dinner check wouldn't make much difference.

Heupel showed up looking just as seedy as before.

Neale glared at him, then at Webber, who closed his eyes and prayed for a miracle.

The miracle was granted. He didn't have a chance to say more than twenty words all evening. Heupel and Neale hit it off spectacularly, bubbling on and on about debits, credits, analogs, esoteric circuitry, and market penetration. Webber leaned back, nibbled at escargots, and sipped fine bourbon.

As they were getting ready to leave, Neale stopped him at the men's-room door, beaming, and ground Webber's hand into pulp.

"You're a genius," he declared, "an absolute genius!"

Neale's check was delivered by messenger two days later. He should have been elated, but instead it made him suspicious. He regarded cynicism as healthy, a defense mechanism like pain.

He still had Neale's file. He compared it with Heupel's. There were some remarkable coincidences. Both had degrees in electronics engineering from the same school in the same year. Both had earned MBAs from that same institution two years later. And both had passed their CPA exams there two years after that. To be sure it was a huge state university, but it was unlikely that they hadn't attended at least a few classes together. Yet at dinner there'd been no reminiscing, no talk about

football or campus parties. They had been like utter strangers, with their only link career similarities and professional interests.

Webber made some phone calls and decided to dig deeper. Neale's ridiculously outsized fee would take care of the overhead and more for a while, and with most big companies holding back on expenditures because of the talk of a recession he really didn't have that much else to do.

DataAid had moved twice since Evan Neale's appointment, each time to quarters substantially more spacious and elegant. The American Dream, Webber thought as he drove up the service road to the impressive new building.

Evan Neale slouched behind a massive rosewood desk when Webber was shown in. He was not smiling. "Didn't you get your check?"

"Yes, and I appreciate the promptness. I came by because I don't believe my assignment ends when I trot over to the bank. I feel that I owe my clients more than that, especially if I think I made a mistake."

"Commendable," Neale said icily, fidgeting with a pencil. "But what's the point of this visit?"

"I investigated Mr. Heupel further," Webber replied. "While he may seem at the outset a model—"

"He is proving to be such."

"—candidate, there was an important omission."

"Really?"

"I recently situated a retired FBI agent into a good security job. He was quite grateful and we've remained friendly. He was happy to do me a favor. His former colleagues were happy to do him a favor."

"Your point?" Neale snapped.

"Your Mr. Heupel, as qualified as he might be, had a lengthy employment lapse. It turns out that his last three years were spent in a minimum-security prison in California. His conviction was for grand larceny. Translated, that means—in his case—computer theft; specifically, drawing the sap from credit cards at the bank where he was employed. Being a layman, I don't know precisely what he did, though it was probably worth his while. At his trial they could only approximate how much he stole."

"I know," Neale said evenly. "He admitted that to me. He's paid for his mistake."

"I'm not here for a pound of flesh, Mr. Neale, although Mr. Malonson might like a chunk of yours if he were alive."

Neale flushed crimson and glanced at his watch. "Fascinating, Webber, but there's no room on my schedule for games today."

"This is no game," Webber said. "Jerry Malonson certainly wouldn't consider it one. I'm speculating that he was helping you steal from your clients and maybe even your clients' clients. Maybe you argued over the percentages. Maybe not. Maybe he just caught you with your hand in the cookie jar up to your shoulder and, being totally innocent, he was outraged. The possibilities, like the future of the computer business, are virtually endless."

Neale cracked his knuckles. "Is that a murder accusation?"

"Oh, no. I doubt there's enough evidence for that. The police would have fingered you by now if there were. You've always impressed me as being rather thorough. And you're not the type to go to pieces and blurt out a confession."

Neale smiled. "You enjoy playing Perry Mason."

"More important," Webber continued, "since we're talking business, is the matter of Mr. Heupel. Your time is obviously valuable, so we shouldn't waste it with a denial that you and he are old cronies. In fact, you probably had him in mind for this job when you took over DataAid. But—shall we say?—he had accepted another position."

Neale's stare was arctic. "That's rather speculative, Webber. Why would I go to the expense of hiring Webber and Associates if I knew Heupel and knew he was available? That college we attended is one of the biggest in the country. You can get lost on that campus."

"To stroke your board of directors," Webber answered. "To make them believe you'd found your man after an exhaustive search. If you'd pulled him out of a hat a day or so after Malonson's murder, there would have been a peculiar odor in the air. Your board likes the job you've done, so they pretty much leave you alone, but they might have become suspicious about your relationship with Heupel and his break in employment. It could have become untidy."

Neale stood up, his knuckles massive and white. Webber sucked a breath to the floor of his chest and said, "I imagine you have quite a temper."

"So I've been told."

"That's why I met with a couple of your directors before coming here."

I showed them your file and Heupel's. They drew similar conclusions, hazy but incriminating. They spoke of a complete audit. There must be computers that can find indiscretions made by other computers. Of course, if the investigation proved out as expected they would like nothing better than to stand you up against sandbags in a public square, but that would be terrible for business."

Neale was seated again, motionless.

"I believe the chairman has been notified. It's possible he will call you to discuss a quiet resignation. The corporate equivalent, I believe, of delivering a pistol to your cell with one round in the chamber."

"That wouldn't surprise me too much," Neale replied. "And I wouldn't be shocked to hear that you've been assigned to replace Mr. Heupel and myself."

"They did mention that it was refreshingly unusual, in this day and age, for a private contractor to assume the initiative of further work after he has been paid."

"And Mr. Heupel and myself?"

"The board members, Evan, are from the old school. They believe in chin-up, carry on. God put carpets on earth for dirt to be swept under. Cooperate and you can get on with your career."

Neale was smiling again, stiffly. "Two years in one place is enough," he said. "As much as I love the Northwest, I haven't really been able to adapt to the rain here. Arizona, Texas, or Los Angeles might be a nice change. Walt is flexible. New frontiers and all that. Any number of burgeoning companies need our talent and experience. If your workload permits—"

Webber rose and opened his briefcase. He had, in fact, talked to a colleague in Alaska just this morning. There were several openings in Fairbanks for top-notch computer people. The hardest thing to explain to prospects was that they couldn't always have everything they wanted. Webber pulled his chair closer and sat down again. "Let's update your file, Evan, and see what we can do," he said amiably.



*The tiny bottle of liquid could kill half of Manhattan . . .*

# TAKE ONE AT BEDTIME

by  
**JEFFRY  
SCOTT**



**S**tella was either restless or deliberately provocative. Either way she was making Crispin sweat. Her breasts kept moving fractionally so that the satin blouse furrowed, billowed, became suddenly shadowed, or took on polished highlights. He missed her remark and felt foolish.

"Tasteless, odorless, colorless," she repeated. "It'd kill you stone dead in five seconds. All the symptoms of a massive heart attack, I heard them saying."

She pouted and her absurdly long silvered fingernails scrabbled at the little purse. Crispin burnt his thumb in the scramble to light her cigarette. She noted his haste with a spark of smug amusement.

"Anyway, lover, that's why I was late. We can't leave until Professor Michele signs the log to confirm that the stuff's locked up. It's crazy, two ways at once." She yawned prettily, like a green-eyed blonde kitten, and arched her spine.

For once, Crispin failed to respond. "How d'you mean?" he asked casually, hardly seeing her.

"Well, the key goes in my drawer along with the rest, so what's the big deal about signing a book? And who's going to steal old Prof's cocktail, anyway? Only a maniac who'd get a buzz out of killing somebody. Believe me, they're all nuts at the lab, but not that crazy."

Crispin started at a touch on his sleeve, gaping up with a sly, guilty expression. It was only the waiter, saying that their table was ready.

Stella enjoyed the meal, but then she always liked luxurious things at someone else's expense. Crispin wasn't aware of what he ate and drank. He was wondering about Stella. She was, he thought, super in bed. Also greedy, mercenary, totally without ethics. So why not ask her?

Then he remembered Dr. Custis, and scowled. He could see that shrewd man, one of the unchallenged tribal elders of Barlerville. In Crispin's mind, Custis stared speculatively at him—those yellowish goat's eyes and the wisp of grey beard making the doctor look even more of a crafty, seasoned old animal. Dr. Custis always knew, and what he didn't know he guessed. His opinion of Crispin was low.

Crispin's scowl deepened. He was remembering his last visit to his hometown, visiting Grandfather Barler.

He'd managed to wheedle \$1,500 out of the ashen-faced, blue-lipped old man. But Dr. Custis had appeared as Crispin bounded away to his car, already daydreaming the cash away on Stella and a dizzying ration of cocaine.

"Hello, Crisp. Been hittin' my friend agin fer yer mad money?" Goat's eyes stripping and dwindling him. Dr. Custis' smiles and sneers were interchangeable. "Ye're a worthless young pup, Crispin."

Crispin gulped imported hock, making faces as if it was vinegar. The guy had a nerve! Acting as if he owned Grandfather's house and business just because he'd been running both ever since Crispin was a kid. He'd virtually given up general practice in Barlerville after Crispin's parents

had died in the plane crash, to tend Grandfather and help him invest and deploy his money.

All that would change, Crispin decided savagely—and not for the first time—once Grandfather died and he inherited.

But when would that be? Crispin had expected to hit the jackpot by the time he graduated, and here he was, past thirty. That was Dr. Custis again—coddling the old man, keeping him alive.

Colorless, odorless, tasteless. Heart attack symptoms. Well, heart trouble ran in the family. Grandfather would die from one when he had the common decency to succumb. Crispin himself was vulnerable, he thought self-pityingly. Rheumatic fever when he was in school had left him—or so he had insisted, especially to his draft board—an invalid:

Take one at bedtime, he thought. How many times had he read that on the label of the bottle of Grandfather's capsules?

Stella finished a sickly looking concoction, heavy on brandy, meringue, and whipped cream. "Run that past me again, darlin'?"

Crispin shook his head. "Nothing."

It was nearly a week before he raised courage to say to her, "Stella, don't refuse before you've thought it through. How would you like to make a very, very great deal of money?"

It took Stella even longer to agree. At first she rejected the proposal in panic. "Hey, doll, this is heavy stuff you're layin' on me! I've done some weird stuff, but I've never been in the slammer."

Crispin reasoned, lured, nagged. "You're only a secretary," he argued bluntly. "If they ever did miss the stuff they'd never suspect you." He was never sure whether she was genuinely fearful or simply pushing the price up.

In the end, he had to sell the car and the stock portfolio left by his father to meet Stella's demand. It got him a bottle smaller than his thumb, and only half full at that.

Stella looked hag-ridden when she came to his apartment to deliver the bottle. "You could kill half Manhattan with that!" she said shrilly. "It only takes a drop, you know." Then she had burst into tears and—extraordinary for her—offered to repay the money if he'd give up the scheme. Whatever it was, she added quickly. She didn't want to know.

In fact, she was going to Florida for a month, starting tonight . . .



To Crispin's relief, Dr. Custis was away on vacation too—a short one in the mountains—when Crispin arrived at Barlerville.

Grandfather seemed weary but glad to see him. Business was bad. Even Dr. Custis' advice hadn't prevented some doomed and costly projects.

Crispin melted for all of five minutes. Why not let Grandfather live out his natural span? But then he remembered how much money he was spending on cabs without a car, and how expensive nose candy was getting. And how, now that Stella had deserted him, a new woman was unlikely to be any less expensive. Incredible blondes didn't take naturally to Crispin. Youth must be served, he thought self-righteously.

He waited for Grandfather to doze.

The capsules in the bottle within reach of the wheelchair were large and brown. Crispin unscrewed the jar soundlessly and removed one before padding up to his bedroom.

It took no time at all to nick the capsule with a razor, squeeze out the contents, and inject far more than a single drop from Stella's little bottle. Throwing the syringe on the open fire, he hid the bottle back in his valise and went downstairs again.

This time he emptied all the capsules into his palm, dropped the deadly one in, and poured the rest back on top of it.

Taking one at bedtime, Grandfather would have his heart attack in more or less twenty days.

They were the longest days of his life. The first week lasted a year. After two weeks he was at breaking point.

Then, on Day Twenty, his phone rang. "Crisp, it's bad news." Dr. Custis' voice cracked. "It's yer Grandpop, boy. Ye'd better get here fast."

Crispin went to his boss, explaining the circumstances. Four hours later he was taking the front steps of the mansion two at a time. The servants looked at him oddly and he froze a bereaved, confused expression onto his face.

Dr. Custis was waiting in the drawing room. "Shut the door, boy." Custis stared at him piercingly. "Well, it's happened. This morning, soon after he woke up."

Crispin looked away from those terrible eyes. He forced a sob, smeared his hands across his face. "No, no! Grandfather!" He flung himself onto

a chair and made his shoulders heave. "I loved him so!"

"Maybe I misjudged yer." Custis sounded sheepish as well as shaken. "Hey, come on, young Crispie, get a grip on yerself." He hauled Crispin back into the chair. "Take this."

Blubbering, Crispin swallowed obediently. He blew his nose, shook his head helplessly.

"That's better." The other man spoke moodily, his big freckled hands twisting between his knees. "They always calmed your Grandpop, Crisp. Lucky he had one left before—" Dr. Custis didn't finish the sentence. He simply held up the now empty, recognizable jar.

It took a moment before Crispin took in the implication. "*How did he die?*" He could barely whisper it.

"Die?" Dr. Custis' wisp of goat-beard wagged as he chuckled, his expression changing. "He hasn't died, boy. He broke a small bone in his foot gettin' out of bed. Not good fer a man his age, but I'll get him back to rights."

Grandfather wasn't dead.

The capsule hadn't killed him.

Dr. Custis had just given *him* the last capsule.

Crispin felt awful. His lungs refused to function. His cheeks flamed. His heart tried first to beat through and then squeeze past his ribs. He croaked something and staggered to his feet.

"Colorless, odorless, tasteless," Dr. Custis sneered, and then he cackled. "Crisp, my boy, that fishing vacation was a blind. I went to Vegas with my sister's child. Name of Stella. Always wanted to blow a bundle at the tables with a pretty girl."

Crispin wasn't listening. "The antidote! Save me!"

Dr. Custis shook his head regretfully, crossed his legs, lit a foul black cheroot, and puffed luxuriously. Crispin started out of the room, then yelled a curse as agonizing pain skewered through his chest. He fell on the carpet, then lay irrevocably still.

Dr. Custis gazed down at him, clicked his tongue, and drew on the cheroot. He liked Crispin's grandfather, and he liked embezzling the dotard's fortune even more. Crispin had posed a problem. But it was a problem Crispin himself had solved beautifully all on his own.

*It began when Hilda inherited 1,000 shares of stock . . .*

# DEATH OF A DREAM

by  
**JAMES  
HOLDING**



**W**hen Hilda inherited a thousand shares of Intercontinental stock from this great-uncle of hers, I knew that it was my big chance.

For I was sick of Hilda—deathly sick—after being married to her for seven years. I wanted to get away from her tiresome adoration of me, from her emptyheaded chatter, from the distasteful necessity of watching her grow ever fatter and dowdier.

I wanted desperately, too, to escape from my dull job in the bank,

where I was stuck in a junior-executive rut that I knew would never lead to a future worthy of my capabilities.

You can see why I welcomed Hilda's legacy.

Fortunately, Hilda was unbelievably naive about money matters, even though I worked in a bank. You'd have thought that a little money sense would have rubbed off on her just listening to my dinner table conversation for seven years. But no. Hilda remained wide-eyed and innocent about all things financial right up to the end. It wasn't because she thought money slightly degrading, as many do. It was just because she was naturally stupid.

Her face and figure had been superb when I married her. That's what had attracted me to her. But inside that pretty, boring little head of hers, I soon discovered, there wasn't room for anything but a simple doglike devotion to me and a few very commonplace thoughts about clothes, movies, television programs, and country cooking. And her beautiful figure began to disappear under layers of fat within a year of our wedding.

Anyway, the day we received the stock certificate from the Chicago lawyers who were settling Hilda's great-uncle's estate, I dropped into Jamie's Bar on the way home from the bank. When I got home, Hilda kissed me at the door.

"Why, you've been drinking, Chester," she said.

"A quick one in Jamie's Bar on my way home," I said, "to celebrate your legacy."

"Oh," Hilda said with her noble, forgiving air, "that's nice. Now come to dinner, dear. It's ready. Ham and cabbage."

You see? Ham and cabbage! When every nerve in my bored body was crying out for caviar, beef stroganoff, and champagne under a purple sky with a beautiful slender woman!

Dissembling, I said, "Oh, good! But let's see that stock certificate you told me came in the mail today."

She got an envelope off the TV cabinet for me.

"Here it is," she said. "And goodness! Look at all the postage!"

"It's registered mail, that's why. And rightly so, Hilda. Do you realize this piece of paper is worth over a hundred thousand dollars?"

"Really?" Hilda said. "How nice! I think it was dear of Uncle Lew to leave it to me, don't you?"

"Very generous and thoughtful, yes." I opened the certificate, made out on its face to Mrs. Hilda Carstairs. "Of course, it's a growth stock.

Intercontinental doesn't pay any dividends yet. But it's nice to have it, certainly." I pointed to the endorsement line on the back. "You'd better sign it right now, dear. Then everything will be legal and the transaction will be completed."

"Sign it? Of course. I should have known. What for?" She took the fountain pen I handed her and signed her name on the back of the certificate.

"That's your receipt signature," I told her blandly. "The stock certificate isn't good without your signature on the back. Once you've signed it, they know the stock really belongs to you." I folded up the certificate and shoved it carelessly into my pocket.

"I'll put it in our safe-deposit box at the bank," I said.

She nodded without much interest.

"The ham and cabbage will be getting cold," she said. "Let's eat now, dear."

Somehow the ham and cabbage tasted better that night than ever before.

I waited for several months, assuaging my natural impatience as best I could. Then, on my lunch hour one day, I got Hilda's stock certificate out of my safe-deposit box and drove out to a suburban branch of The Farmer's Bank, a competitor of my own bank. I happened to know one of the tellers there, a fellow named Hogarth. I'd sat beside him at a Bankers' Association dinner one time, and we'd been speaking acquaintances ever since.

I went directly to the branch manager's desk and introduced myself. Then I said matter-of-factly, "I'd like to borrow seventy thousand dollars, Mr. Norbit," reading his name off the plate on his desk.

He raised his eyebrows, exactly as a banker is commonly supposed to do on hearing such words.

"That's quite a big loan, Mr. Carstairs," he said noncommittally. He looked at me, sensibly awaiting further information.

"I'm conscious of that. I'm prepared to put up excellent collateral, however. One thousand shares of Intercontinental. I have it right here."

Mr. Norbit's face cleared immediately. His sharp eyes followed my hand into my jacket pocket. When it came out holding Hilda's stock certificate, he said expansively, "Ah, that's a very sound company, Mr. Carstairs. A very sound security. But apt to be volatile, you know."

He opened a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* on his desk and took a quick look at yesterday's closing prices.

"Closed at 104 last night," he murmured. "I'm afraid, though, we can't let you have seventy thousand on it, Mr. Carstairs. The market is currently rather unsettled. And the stock is volatile, subject to big swings. We have to be well covered on a loan of this size, you know."

"I understand it," I said. "I'm a banker myself."

"Really?" He was surprised.

"Yes. I'm applying to you for the loan instead of my own bank because I don't want everybody at my place to know my personal business."

"Wait a minute." Norbit picked up his telephone and called his headquarters office. "What's the limit I can lend on a thousand shares of Intercontinental?" he asked somebody there. The home-office man said something and Norbit hung up. He said to me, "We can't let you have more than sixty-five."

I said, deadpan, "That'll have to do, then." It was more than I'd hoped. "I'm in a hurry for the money. I've got this very promising investment opportunity in a new business—" I told him about it in detail.

"Fine," he said. "I'll have the note drawn up. Six percent all right?"

"Sure. And ninety days."

He nodded and held out his hand for the stock certificate. I gave it to him. He turned it over, saw that Hilda had signed it, but looked doubtful.

"I'm sure you'll understand," he said then, "but on a loan of this size, we have to be very careful. Is this Hilda Carstairs, to whom the stock is registered, your wife?"

"Yes."

"And she's willing to pledge her stock for this loan?"

"She endorsed the certificate, didn't she? It's negotiable."

"True. But we can't be sure she endorsed it willingly, can we?"

I pretended indignation. "You know I'm Chester Carstairs."

"Not for sure," he interrupted apologetically.

"Call your teller, Mr. Hogarth. He knows me. He knows I'm married too."

Mr. Norbit, without embarrassment, did exactly that. Hogarth identified me at once and vouched for me.

After all, a member of the Bankers' Association—

When Hogarth left, I said to Norbit, "You want me to get Hilda to sign a specific permission form for you?"

I was still pretending hurt at his lack of confidence in me. But I could have got Hilda to sign one if he'd wanted it. She wouldn't know it from a laundry receipt.

"That won't be necessary," he said with dignity. "How do you want the money?"

"I'll open a checking account with you, and you can pay the sixty-five thousand into it. O.K.?"

"Good. Then we'll just charge your account with the monthly interest on the loan."

And so it was arranged. I signed the note for the loan, left Hilda's stock certificate with Norbit, and opened a new account with the Farmer's Bank, into which the sixty-five thousand was to be paid next day.

A week later, I went down into the safe deposit vault in my own bank on my lunch hour. I signed the admission card, gave my box key to Charlie, the custodian, and went with him to my box location. While he was withdrawing my box from the metallic ranks of others in section C, I ostentatiously lighted a cigarette and said, "I guess I'll use a booth this time, Charlie. I've got to go through my box."

"O.K., Mr. Carstairs," said Charlie. "How about booth four here?"

"Swell," I said, blowing cigarette smoke. I entered the booth with my safety deposit box. "Thanks, Charlie." He closed the door of the booth behind me and left me to myself.

I put my cigarette down on the edge of the booth table, flipped both ends of my deposit box open and rummaged its entire contents out on the table top. There was nothing of much importance there. I had no stocks or bonds, no cash stashed away. There was the house lease, a small insurance policy (lapsed), birth certificates for Hilda and me, the passports we'd used on our Caribbean honeymoon (expired), a silver medal I'd won in the high jump at a high school track meet, and a ragged bundle of old income-tax records that went back to our first joint return.

I set the bundle of income-tax records near the edge of the table, right up against the end of my neglected cigarette. Then I patiently blew on the cigarette coal until the papers caught a spark from it, glowed briefly, then emitted a tongue of flame. I let the income-tax papers get well alight, fanning smoke over the booth's half door into the vault outside.

I dumped my other papers on top of the burning tax records, waiting until they were flaming merrily, then cursed at the top of my voice and

yelled, "Charlie! Hey, Charlie! Fire!" I began beating at the burning papers with my hands.

Charlie had seen the smoke because, just as I yelled, he arrived with a small fire-extinguisher. I had the fire out by then, and was regarding the charred remains of my valuable papers with dismay when he pulled the half door open.

"What happened?" he asked in a flustered voice.

"Cigarette caught the stuff on fire." A rueful glance at my slightly burned hands seemed indicated here.

"That's tough," Charlie said. "But I'm glad you weren't burned seriously, Mr. Carstairs." He took in the charred papers. "Did anything valuable burn up?"

"Nothing I can't replace. Nothing even very important, except for a stock certificate that belongs to my wife. It serves me right for being careless. I'm glad I didn't set the bank on fire. Whew! I was scared there for a minute!"

"Me too," agreed Charlie with emphasis.

That night, between reluctant mouthfuls of Hilda's macaroni casserole, I told her about my accidental fire.

"Oh, Chester darling!" she cried with characteristic disregard of the really important issue. "You might have been badly burned!"

"True," I said, "but I wasn't. A couple of little blisters. What did get burned up was that stock your uncle left you."

"That's too bad," said Hilda, clicking her tongue. "But we can get along without it all right. We did before."

I broke the news to her. "We didn't actually lose the money, of course. We can get a new stock certificate to replace the burned one, Hilda. There'll be a lot of red tape to go through, that's all."

"What will we have to do?"

"You'll have to write Intercontinental and tell them your certificate has been destroyed by fire and you want a new one. They'll send you a form to fill out, applying for an indemnity bond. You submit the form, with a statement of the facts as to how the original certificate was destroyed, to a surety company. For a price, the surety company will issue you a bond of indemnity covering the face amount of your original stock certificate. Then you'll get a new stock certificate to replace the old one.

"Goodness!" Hilda said, bewildered. "What's a bond of indemnity?"

See what I mean about Hilda? A complete blank about money matters.



In the following weeks, however, she went through all the red tape I'd described, and finally was qualified to be issued a new certificate for her thousand shares of Intercontinental. I had to guide her every step of the way, of course. Luckily, she was very incurious about the whole thing.

She never even questioned where I'd found the six-thousand-dollar premium to pay for her bond of indemnity. Actually it was the first check I'd drawn on my new sixty-five-thousand-dollar account at the Farmers' Bank.

Well, when Hilda's new stock certificate arrived I pulled my fountain pen out of my pocket once more and said, "Has to be signed, Hilda. Remember?"

"Oh, yes. My receipt signature. Isn't that what you said?" She scrawled her name carelessly on the endorsement line.

The next morning, as soon as the market opened, I sold Hilda's thousand shares of Intercontinental through the brokerage office in my own bank building where I was known, turning over her new certificate to the broker. The stock brought 105 dollars a share. This, less brokerage fees and commissions, meant a net profit to me of over a hundred thousand dollars. I told the broker to deliver his check for the amount to me at my office.

I got the check on Monday morning, April second. I remember the date very well. I used my lunch hour to drive out to the Farmer's Bank branch where I had my new account. I told Mr. Norbit, the manager, that I was going to deposit my broker's check in my account there, that I had liquidated some other holdings of mine in order to add to my capital for the investment venture I'd described to him.

"What I'd like is a cashier's check for the whole thing, Mr. Norbit—this hundred thousand and the total of my account here—as evidence of absolutely certified funds to use as a bargaining factor in my negotiations with my future colleagues. I'd leave enough in my account to cover my interest payments on your loan, of course."

Norbit nodded. "We'll have to wait till this large check clears," he warned me, but it was just routine. He thought I was a real operator now.

"I'll come by and pick up your cashier's check for the entire amount on Wednesday morning. How'll that be?"

He nodded again.

On Wednesday morning, when I left for the office it was with an overnight bag in my hand containing the minimum clothing and equipment for a flight to Brazil. That's where I intended to go to find my caviar, champagne, and slender women. I had a confirmed Pan-American reservation on the one-thirty flight to Rio, made two weeks previously. I'd told Hilda I was going out of town on bank business that afternoon for overnight. When I kissed her goodbye, it was with an overwhelming sense of relief that from now on I'd never have to do it again, never have to pretend again to enjoy her silly ham and cabbage and macaroni casserole.

I worked calmly at the bank until the noon hour. Then I cashed a check on my account there that nearly cleaned it out, just for current expenses. Chicken feed to hold me until my cashier's check was comfortably cashed in Brazil.

I went out to the Farmer's Bank, picked up my cashier's check, stowed it in my wallet, and left, thanking Mr. Norbit politely. I now had parlayed a small piece of engraved paper that didn't even belong to me into a hundred and sixty thousand dollars' cash.

I drove to the airport, savoring my triumph, put the car in the parking lot and went into the waiting room. It was one-fifteen.

At one-twenty, they called my flight. I rose from my secluded seat in the waiting room and started for the loading gate.

That's when I saw Hilda.

She was hurrying toward me from the entrance, a tentative smile on her face and a tall, yellow-eyed man in tow.

She came up to me and said happily, "Chester!" She drew the tall man forward by an arm. "This is my husband, Chester Carstairs," she introduced us. "And this is Lieutenant Randall from the Detective Bureau, darling."

My heart sank in my chest like a wobbly duck in a downdraft. "Detective!" was all I could get out.

Hilda nodded brightly. "Lieutenant Randall wants to arrest you, darling," she said. "Mr. Norbit and I asked him to."

Randall put a firm hand on my arm. I was stunned, completely at a loss. But one thing was sure: I was done for. I could never explain away the duplicate stock certificates.

In the police car, on the way into town, I said to Lieutenant Randall, "How did Norbit get wise, will you please tell me that?" I felt put upon and indignant.

It was Hilda who answered my question.

"Oh, Mr. Norbit didn't guess for a minute anything was wrong, Chester. Not until I telephoned him."

I couldn't believe it. She was a moron about money. "How did you happen to call Mr. Norbit? You never heard of the man!"

"That's right, darling. Not until this morning. Not until that funny thing came in the mail."

"What funny thing?"

"That bank statement, or whatever you call it. From the wrong bank, Chester. Don't you see?"

Gloomily I reflected that it's the little routine details that trip you up every time. I'd forgotten about monthly bank statements. Me—a banker. I croaked, "The wrong bank?"

"Of course. You work at the First National, silly. I know that much. And our only bank account has been there, naturally. But this morning you got a statement from the Farmer's Bank. I thought it was a mistake, so I opened it. And you know what, darling? It showed that a Chester Carstairs at our address had more than a hundred and sixty thousand dollars in an account there!" Hilda gulped. "I knew very well you couldn't have as much money as that! You're always telling me I have to skimp. So I was sure it was a mistake. I just simply called the Farmer's Bank and told them so."

"And you talked to Mr. Norbit, I suppose?"

"Why, yes, and he was very nice. When I told him who I was, he said, 'Oh, the lady whose Intercontinental stock we're holding as security for some loan we made your husband.'"

"And then you told him it couldn't be your stock, because it had burned up and you'd just received a new certificate?"

"Well, I didn't understand why he wanted to know, but I couldn't just politely refuse to tell him, could I?"

"No, I suppose not," I said wearily.

"Especially," Hilda went on, "when he told me you were probably leaving the country right that minute with my money and his too, and not even taking me with you!"

In a weary, injured tone I said, "And you believed him? You'd really think that—"

"I thought it was a possibility, Chester," she said defensively, "because one of the cancelled checks that came with that bank statement this morning was made out to Pan-American Airways. And it seemed like a lot too much money to pay for the little short trip you'd told me you were taking today. So when I told Mr. Norbit about that—"

"That's enough, Hilda," I said. "Don't go on." I lapsed into miserable silence. Lieutenant Randall looked at me and grinned.

"Smart girl," he said, jerking his head toward Hilda.

Hilda was crying now.

"I didn't want you to leave me, Chester," she wailed. "I love you—you know that."

"So you betrayed me to the police?"

Hilda sniffed.

"Yes," she said solemnly. "This won't make any difference to me, Chester, I promise you. When you come out of prison, I'll be waiting for you."

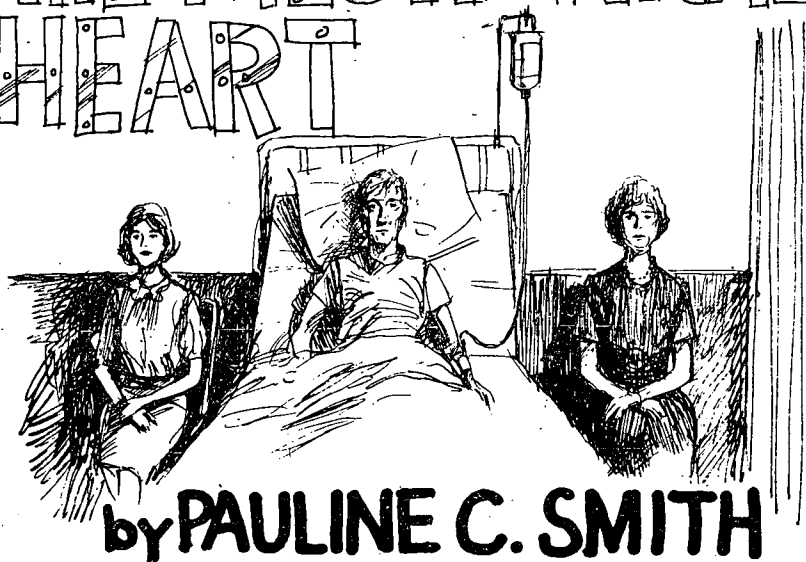
I sighed and closed my eyes. Sadly I said farewell forever to my dream of caviar, champagne, and slender girls. For me there would never be anything but ham and cabbage, macaroni casserole, and Hilda. If or when I ever get out.

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*Theirs was a Victorian lifestyle in almost modern dress . . .*

# THE MECHANICAL HEART



by **PAULINE C. SMITH**

**W**hen Mother phoned to tell me Father was to have heart surgery, my immediate thought was: I didn't know he had a heart—a set of principles, a book of rules, a list of laws perhaps—but a *heart*? Mother's calm and proper voice explained in dignified and impersonal terms the reason for the operation and the function of the pacemaker that was to be implanted.

"I'll get the first plane out," I promised in a voice as serenely composed as hers. My parents still did this to me, even after ten years of marriage.

The minute I made contact, I was their ladylike daughter, with rigid back, fixed smile, feelings nicely buttoned up.

Father's heart surgery was carried out with Mother's and my hands folded suitably on our laps; no wailing, no weeping, not even a single heavy sigh to break the proper decorum.

His recovery was handled just as punctiliously with our twice-daily visits to the hospital, Mother at one side of his bed, I at the other, each speaking softly—not about the operation, but about the weather and other insignificant subjects.

Those weeks at home were for me a time of exceeding boredom to which my conditioned reflexes responded so that when sitting I sat straight, with ankles primly crossed, and when standing my legs were puritanically close together.

Mother whiled away the hours writing gracious little thank-you notes for the flowers and cards she'd received. I whiled mine away in my old room, browsing through the artifacts I'd left there.

The most significant of the memorabilia I'd left there seemed to me to be the gloves—short white dancing-school gloves, elbow-length formal gloves. Gloves had been very important when I was young. Cover up, mitten up, don't let your fingers show—your skin, your pores, your feelings. Don still teases me about leaving my gloves on the first night we spent in a motel, when we were college seniors and left the prom for less formal and more intimate pleasures—which is not true, of course.

But if the gloves were a symbol of my slavishly correct upbringing, the hair dryer marked the emancipation begun the last spring I was home. I found the electric dryer, a hand-blower type, on the upper shelf of my closet and took it down, remembering that spring vacation as a time of frequent shampoos, of brushing my hair into sleek simplicity, rolling it into curly piquancy, teasing it into bouffant sophistication—all in order to snare Don in the tangle of my imaginative tresses once I returned to campus.

"My old hair dryer," I showed my mother.

Smiling remotely and without comment, she returned to her thank-you notes.

We both returned to the hospital each day to sit beside Father while the little box inside his chest mechanically regulated his mechanical heart.

He didn't look sick. He looked as he always had, important and im-

perious. His very few strands of steel-grey hair, the steel-grey glint of his eyes, and the steely firm set of his jaws had decided me long ago that God had sent him to earth for the sole purpose of keeping the Oakview citizenry lawfully upright in his role as judge and the Presbyterian congregation morally virtuous in his role as church elder.

I did not know a blessed thing about him except that he was now sixty-eight, hooked up to a device that would enable him to continue his ordained work and married to my equally humorless mother who was fifty-six and imperturbable in her "little black nothing-dress with the strand of 'good' pearls." She was my father's appendage—a rib, that is—fashioned to be a follower, theirs a Victorian lifestyle in almost modern dress.

I observed them during a time of ordeal that should have brought us all together with understanding but did not.

On the last day of his hospitalization I discovered the grotesque inability of my father as well as my mother to face any kind of truth. But it was also that day, as I now look back, that I think Mother caught a glimmer of understanding of herself and her life with my father.

He sat straight and stern in the wheelchair as the doctor explained the life-giving pacemaker that engendered 100,000 impulses daily to keep the heart functioning. He cautioned Father to be careful and Mother watchful. He warned them against microwave ovens, whose rays could trigger leaks in the tiny batteries. He told Father never to approach a car whose hood was raised with the motor running. "Don't ever let your barber use electric hair clippers," he said. That was when Mother asked her ludicrous question and Father accepted its absurdity. She asked politely, with passive concern, if a dentist's drill might be dangerous. She asked it knowing that Father didn't have a tooth in his head. And Father waited for the doctor's reply as if he too believed all the thirty-two porcelains he never revealed in a smile were firmly implanted in his gums and not falsely inserted.

I knew then that my parents lived such a lie of procedural propriety that they didn't, couldn't know the truth they had hidden from themselves for so long.

The doctor rallied after a moment and explained with exaggerated seriousness that the length of cord leading from the electric motor to activate a dental drill not only minimized but nullified any danger of upsetting the rhythm of the pacer. He further expounded on the differ-

ence between a safely distant motor and an unsafe nearby one, such as an electric hair clipper.

"Or hair dryer?" asked Mother, and I looked from her to Father, who was not surprised since they both remembered and still lived with his once bountiful shock of hair, regarding it, like his teeth, as reality.

"Or hair dryer," agreed the doctor.

So Father came home with the knowledge that the slightest shock could kill him, but with the prognostication that by following a few simple rules he could and probably would continue to judge the Oakview lawbreakers and elder the Presbyterians for many years to come.

After a decent interval of time, during which I observed my parents slip back into the lifestyle they had not essentially left, I made ready to leave.

My mother surprised me as I was packing. She tapped on my door, walked into my room, sat on the edge of the bed, and watched while I emptied drawers, folded garments, and set them in the suitcase.

Then I shut the drawers, closed the closet doors, and picked up the hair dryer from the top of the dresser. Mother leaned forward. "Are you taking that with you?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I've got one at home." I reached up, opened the door of the top closet shelf, and put the dryer away.

At the door I brushed my father's cheek with mine, then my mother's. In the cab, slouched down on my spine, one knee perched on the other, I relaxed at last. At the airport, I took my seat on the plane, stripped off my gloves, stuffed them under the seat, and anticipated my homecoming and letting it all hang out with a husband who's as loose as a mobile in the breeze and a couple of kids as stylized as frisbees.

After six months of Father court-judging and church-eldering at a regular seventy pacemaker beats a minute and Mother penning little notes about his health and the weather in Oakview, I received a phone call from her—this one informing me in her precise and unemotional voice that my father was dead.

By the time I arrived, Mother had everything under control—the death certificate was signed, the funeral arrangements completed—and flowers were already arriving. There was nothing left for me to do but select a pair of black gloves from the drawers in my old room and accompany my



mother to the services—which were, of course, conducted with estimable taste.

Afterward, I asked her what had happened.

“Why, Margaret, your father died.”

“Yes, but how? And where?”

“It was an attack. His heart.”

“But *where*, Mother? And *how*?”

“He died in his sleep, Margaret. In his bed.”

When the soft-voiced mourners came to offer their sympathy, I left Mother to accept their haloed tributes and escaped to the room she had shared with my father for thirty-eight years.

There I opened the closet doors, and lifted down the ultra-conservative suits he had left behind, and folded them on his bed. I would call the Presbyterian Church and donate them to the needy. Mother would sit in this house forever, these suits in the closet, not in memoriam but because to hand them down to be worn by heaven-knew-who would be unseemly. I lifted Father’s shoes from the shoe rack, each pair identical except for color—and there I found my hair dryer, wedged between the metal loops of the rack.

I pulled it free and held it in my hands. The murmurs from downstairs diminished and then I heard the click of the closing front door.

I laid the hair dryer on the bed along with my father’s suits and waited for Mother to come up and ask why I hadn’t been at her side to thank the departing guests.

When she entered the room, a ladylike frown of displeasure crossed her face. “What are you doing, Margaret?”

“I’m getting Father’s things together to give to charity.”

“No.” She settled herself sedately on the slipper chair and crossed her ankles. “It’s far too soon.”

I stared at her, this little woman in her little black nothing-dress with her little pink-and-white nothing-face, and wondered what she really felt about Father’s death, if she felt anything at all. “You want them to hang in the closet with him dead and gone? You want them just to hang there?”

“For a decent interval.”

“I found this.” I picked up the hair dryer and held it out.

She smiled remotely.

“I found it here in this room, my old hair dryer.”

“It must be,” she said. “Yours is the only hair dryer in the house.”

"But it was here," I persisted, "in this room."

"Well, take it back, Margaret. Put it where it belongs."

"When the doctor explained the dangers of a pacemaker, you asked about a hair dryer—"

"I suppose I did."

"Why?"

"It was necessary that I know all the precautionary procedures in order to take care of your father adequately."

"Oh, you took care of him, Mother. You took care of him very adequately." She smiled and inclined her head as if she were receiving due homage for a fulfilled obligation. "Mother," I said too loudly, and dropped my voice, "I left the hair dryer in my closet. Up on the shelf."

"Yes," she said. "I remember you found it there when your father was sick. Now why don't you put it back there where it belongs?" She rose and smoothed her hair. "And after that you may return your father's suits to his closet. Hang them carefully, with a space between each hanger, the way he always insisted they be hung." The doorbell rang and she started from the room. Over her shoulder, she added, "And rack the shoes neatly, browns at the left, blacks on the right."

I returned the hair dryer to my closet. Then back in my parents' room I hung my father's suits, with equal air spaces between each, and returned his shoes to his shoe rack—browns to the left, blacks to the right.

The voices from the front of the house were rising in a crescendo of leavetaking. I closed the closet door and went downstairs.

Mother was seated on the Victorian sofa, her ankles crossed. "What will you do now?" I asked.

"Now?"

"Now that Father is gone. What are your plans?"

"I will make no plans. Not for a year."

"A year?"

"A year of mourning, Margaret." She stroked each of her fingers from tip to base with careful precision and, as I watched, I resolved to put the facts of my father's death out of my mind as completely as my mother had.

But if I can blank out my suspicions, I cannot blank out the sure knowledge that, if she did it, she did it with glove-fingered Victorian elegance.

*Rance Rangoon was going to make a comeback . . .*

# BOTTOMED OUT

by  
**ROBERT  
TWOHY**



**W**hen you're in a coffin, you feel out of touch. It's absolutely quiet. For maybe the first time since your glands started working, you have time to think. So you think of things you did and didn't do, and of the people who passed in and out of your life. You're glad you knew this one, sorry you knew that one.

I lay there and was sorry I'd known Marsha. If I hadn't, I probably wouldn't have been shot down at age thirty-two, life's prime time.

On the other hand, maybe I would have been. Marsha wasn't the only woman I was having an affair with. When you're an actor in Hollywood affairs come in clusters. If I hadn't got plugged that April night in Marsha's apartment in Westwood it might have happened the next night, next week, next month, in somebody else's apartment—Melinda's or Zizi's or Savanarella's.

Somehow Marsha's husband, Alfred Grout, a real-estate tycoon, got wind of our affair and that Thursday he didn't go East on business as scheduled, but cabbied back from Burbank and let himself into the apartment while we were out to dinner. When we came back, he was in the bedroom. He wasn't alone—he held a big .45, and its cold eye was fixed on me.

I'm not sure he even knew who I was when he pulled the trigger; all he knew was that I was a guy with broad shoulders and lots of shiny teeth who had been having a thing with Marsha.

So time passed, and I came to and I was in this coffin, and it took me a while to realize that. Then I started thinking of the things I'd done, the people I'd known.

Then, clear as the tinkle of a highball glass, I heard a laugh. Not a jolly laugh—more like sardonic. I said, "Who laughed?"

"Irwin Groggins—you can call me Grog." It was a flat, nothing voice. "Just don't call me Frogface. I hate that. Even when it's said in good humor."

"Where are you?"

"Right above you. Marcelina is with me."

"Hi," said a soft voice.

Then I heard ripping sounds, like a crowbar ripping up nails, and called, "Hey, wait!" But the ripping went on. Then the blackness over me was cut with an angle of light. Not much light—pretty wishy-washy—but after stone-dark, you're glad for anything.

I wondered out loud, "How come I didn't get a faceful of dirt?"

"You want a faceful of dirt?"

"No, but—" I hitched my shoulders, shifted my hips, moved my head, lifted my arms to stretch. In the pale light I could see my hands. No, not hands—I saw a lot of skinny finger bones.

I raised a foot and saw hanging from it a shred of shoe and, under and around the shred, nothing but bone.

I said, "I'm a skeleton."

The top was all the way off the coffin now. I put my hand bones on the edges and pushed myself up. As I got vertical there was a rustling sound; I looked down. Shreds and scraps of clothes were falling off me.

"Hey!" I was embarrassed. A woman with a pretty voice was out there, and here I stood in my bare bones—not looking my best at all. Call it vanity, but I used to take pride in my smooth muscles and healthy skin tone.

Now there was no muscle, no healthy skin—no nothing. Just bones and more bones.

I started to sit down.

The woman's voice said, "Oh, don't be an old silly. You look fine."

"I look awful."

"No—you've got cute clavicles and your teeth are terrific. Come on out."

A pink hand took my nearest hand bones and I looked up from it and saw a pretty face with tawny gold hair around it. Gazing back at me were bright green eyes.

So I let myself be led out of the coffin. And now I stood in a stone place—stone floor, stone walls. A still and stoneish place. I kicked the shred of shoe off my foot bone and asked, "Where am I?"

"In a crypt."

"A crypt!" I hadn't ordered a crypt in my will. I hadn't made a will.

"U-G-A paid for it," said Marcelina. "It was a great funeral. Front-page pictures from here to Bangkok. Great advance publicity for the movie."

"What movie?"

"The movie about you."

A movie about me? "Are you sure you've got the right guy?"

"If you're Rance Rangoon, you're the guy," said Groggins.

"Not really. That was my agent's idea. My real name is Homer G. Wermcraft, from The Dalles, Oregon."

"That's beside the point. You're the only Rance Rangoon in a holding pattern."

Now I could see him—a little guy with a wide, lippy mouth and protruding eyes who you could see at a glance why he hated to be called Frogface, even in good humor. He wore a plainish grey robelike thing and held a paper shopping bag by the handles. Marcelina wore a green robelike thing that didn't show her figure but I knew she had a good one,

because her face was the kind of face that goes with a good figure. I'd always been the one to find out which faces go with good figures. Except for the robes, these two looked like people you'd see in the streets anywhere, when you're alive.

Groggins said, "Sit down." He waved toward a crooked stool.

"Why?"

"So Marcelina can start fixing you up."

I sat down. "For what?"

Marcelina said, "Want to see what you look like?"

"No."

She took from inside her robe a small hand mirror, which she held up in front of me. And there was my face without any face on it at all. Just shiny bone, black eye sockets, a black nose socket, and yards of grinning teeth.

I went, "*Gaahh!*" Seeing your hand bones and your chest bones and all your body bones is bad enough, but seeing your face with no face on it is ten times worse. Your face—you always have the thought that, whatever it looks like, it's you—and you're it. With it gone, are you really you? "How can I see with no eyes?"

Groggins said, "Same way you can talk with no tongue, hear with no ears, move with no nerves or muscles, remember things with no brain."

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"That's 'cause I don't understand it myself."

The woman had brought a roll of bandage from under her robe. She started wrapping it around my skull. It seemed to be some kind of self-sticking bandage. She worked fast, seemed to know what she was doing. "Open your jaw. Not too far—that's far enough. I'll wrap you so you can open it that far. Then you'll be able to show those great pearlys."

"Hey, you're bandaging right across my eye sockets!"

"Don't worry. I'll poke holes when I'm finished." She went on wrapping.

With nothing to do or look at, and not knowing what was going on, I thought I might catch up on things. "How about Marsha? Did Grout slug her too?"

"No," said Groggins. "After he shot you he aimed at her, but she told him to behave himself, this wasn't the Dark Ages, this was Hollywood, the Swinging Seventies, so he should act like a grownup and not do something foolish. So he apologized to her."

"How'd his trial come out?"

"They let him off on the grounds that he was suffering from acute diminished capacity."

"What's that?"

"Don't ask me. After the trial U-G-A hired him as chief consultant on the movie they made of your life—and death. Mostly your death. It was a smash. Everybody wanted to watch you get shot. As long as you'd been shot, they thought they should see it."

"Who played me?"

"Tack Tustine."

"That goof?" He was the biggest moron in Hollywood, a total illiterate. He was a fine athlete though—he'd been a basketball All-American at a major university in the Midwest. "He played *me*?"

"Uh-huh. He was great. He won the Academy Award."

I was speechless. Tack Tustine playing me in the movie celebrating my death and winning the Oscar for it! It made me wonder if those awards are truly indicative of an actor's inner essence.

Marcelina said, "Finished. Now I'm going to poke in the eyeholes."

I braced myself, but it didn't hurt a bit. Though completely lacking eyes and what they connect to, I could see through the holes she poked with a nail file through the bandage—not as well as through the unbandaged sockets but as well as when I was alive.

Groggins said, "Now for the shades." I watched him dig into the shopping bag and hand Marcelina a pair of old airplane goggles with an elastic band. She pulled the band over my bandaged skull. The glasses were curved so they fit snugly. "Shake your head. . . Harder. Now up and down." She looked pleased. "They seem pretty secure. Can you see all right?"

"Fine."

"Want to see how you look?"

"No."

She held up the mirror and all I saw was white bandage and two buglike eyes. It was creepy and awful-looking, but better than the bare bones.

Groggins dug into the bag again and got out a big, dark, gangster-style hat with some darker stains on it. I didn't ask what they were. He gave it to Marcelina and she plopped it on my head.

"Now for the scarf and gloves." He tossed her a mangy orange scarf, which she wound around my neck bones, and grey gloves. "Hold up your

hands," she said. I did, and she pulled the gloves over them and buttoned a button against the inside of each wrist.

Groggins came over with a white shirt and put it on me, buttoning it up till it was firm around the scarf. He went back to the bag and took out a pair of baggy grey pants with a green glaze here and there. "Pick up your feet," he said. I did, and he knelt and pulled the pants onto my leg bones. Marcelina went to the bag and took out faded purple socks and scuffed brown shoes. She handed them to him and he worked them over my foot bones. "Stand up." I did, and he pulled up the pants. They had frayed red suspenders attached, which he looped over my shoulders. "Now for the overcoat."

Marcelina gave him a big wadded brown coat from the bag. He shook it and dust and hairs and stuff flew around. He got behind me, hitched the sleeves up my arm bones, got the shoulders in place, walked around in front of me, pulled things here and there, buttoned me up, stepped clear, looked me over, and said, "You look pretty good."

I looked down. The coat drooped around me, its green glaze matching the glaze of the pants.

"Where'd you get all this crummy stuff?"

"Do you really want to know?"

I decided I didn't. He reached in his robe, pulled out a wad of money, and counted it. "Here's eighty-eight bucks." He shoved it into one of my coat pockets. "Now you're all set."

"For what?"

"You're off to Hollywood."

"Why?"

"Don't you want to go?"

"What am I supposed to do there?"

"I dunno. Play it by ear."

"How long do I have?"

"Who knows? Did you ever know in the old days how much time you had?"

"I guess not."

"Why should you know now?"

I didn't know anything. "You bandage me up, give me funky old clothes and flying goggles like nobody wears, and tell me I'm off to Hollywood—one of the toughest towns in the country to make it in even at your best."



Marcelina said, "Don't forget, you've got a pocketful of money."  
"Eighty-eight bucks."

"And you've got those dynamite teeth." She showed her own in a bright smile. "You don't seem to realize that you're a pretty attractive guy."

I shook my head, feeling despondent. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Whatever you do," said Groggins, "it'll be you doing it."

"What does that mean?"

He shrugged, then waved a hand. "See that wall? Start walking toward it. When you reach it, it'll kind of fade out—or it should, if things work right. Just keep on walking and you'll find yourself outside, in the cemetery. Walk to the low wall you'll see, go over it, turn left, and walk to the bus stop on the corner. The bus'll take you to Hollywood Boulevard. From there, go anywhere you want."

I took two steps toward the wall. "You say I can just walk through it?"

"Uh-huh. It seems to be working. You're getting fuzzy around the edges. So long, Rangoon. Have a nice time."

"Good luck," said Marcelina.

I looked back. I didn't see them. Things were just kind of misty back there. I kept walking. Now things were misty all around.

Then the mist was gone. I was standing on grass. It was moonlight. All around me were pale-white blobs—tombstones. I stopped, turned, and looked at the big one I stood in front of. On top of it was sitting a good-looking male angel, not wearing much, gazing in a kind of spaced-out way over the horizon. Under him was a bronze plaque: RANCE RANGOON—MARTYR TO LOVE. 1942–1974.

I liked that. U-G-A had done pretty well by me, even if it had been mostly to push the movie. "Martyr to love"—that was kind of sad and poetic.

I walked away from my memorial. Ahead was the low stone wall. It was about chest-high. I put my hand bones on it and pushed myself up. Being just bones, I was really light. I sailed over, and if I hadn't grabbed the edge of the wall just in time I'd have nose-dived onto the sidewalk on the other side.

I let myself down. I was outside the cemetery now. I turned left, as Groggins had told me, and started walking toward the corner, where I could catch the bus downtown.

It was dark and forlorn on that corner, with the cemetery behind me

and just trees and country around. A small, sick-looking dog came along, stopped, looked at me, and howled mournfully. I told it to beat it, and it did. Nobody else came.

I stood, hands in coat pockets, wondering what I'd do when I got to Hollywood. Maybe I'd stop into a bar. I could order a margarita and have it in front of me and pretend to drink it and look at the people, listen to their talk and to the tunes on the jukebox, start to get the feeling of being back in circulation again. I remembered classy bars I'd been in and began to feel a little hum of excitement inside my empty rib cage. I was on my own with money in my pocket, free to do whatever I wanted. For how long I didn't know, and eighty-eight dollars wouldn't last long, but a smart guy can build up a stake.

Suddenly I flashed on the idea of a card game. I used to play poker a lot; I'd been one of the top non-pros in Hollywood. I didn't need the money I made then but it had been fun to get the better of studio big shots who you had to smile at and be buddy-buddy with for business reasons, all the time loathing them. Maybe I could get into a big poker game and run my stake up.

I walked around a little, finger-boning the wad of bills in my pocket, thinking of getting hot in a big game, winning big money, buying some nifty clothes. The greatest artists of plastic surgery have their offices in Hollywood. Those guys are used to unusual jobs and to keeping their mouths shut. Why couldn't I get one of them to do a job on me, build me up into something as good as I used to be? *Better* than I used to be. Why not?

A great surgeon should find me a cinch to work on. Building on my good framework, he could give me any body I wanted. I'd get him to build steel rope into the plastic, and maybe he could work in some kind of solar motor that would cause the rope to ripple rhythmically so that when I strolled in shorts on the beach I'd be a moving symphony.

I walked around in a fast circle, so excited now I was thumping my gloved hand bones together. I thought of the face I'd have the surgeon make me. The old face had been O.K.—the new one would out-Robert Redford!

And with that new face and rippling torso I'd take myself to a top agent, who'd go all to pieces to sign me as a property. We'd work up a new name for me and a great background. Maybe I could be from Tasmania, where Errol Flynn came from, and I'd got my terrific shape bulldogging

kangaroos across the outback. In a couple of years I could be bigger than Flynn had been, than Redford is—bigger than Rance Rangoon ever dreamed of being. Bigger by far than that moron Tack Tustine!

Lights showed down the road, and I hoped it was the bus at last. It wasn't—it was a cab. It slowed as it passed me, and I waved it on past. The stake I had wasn't much, and I might need all of it. If I found a game, good things could start happening. That's the way it is in this town, if you keep fixed on the idea that, inside, you're still hot stuff.

I had that thought, and then I heard Groggins's flat voice: "Inside, you're still just hot air."

It startled me. I looked around, thinking he was near. I even said out loud, "Where are you?" But all I saw was the cab, which had pulled up a little way beyond me and was now backing up. Groggins hadn't really spoken, it was just a negative thought that had filtered into my skull. I threw it out, fixing on the notion that I'd find a game, my stake would grow, and I'd get decent clothes, find a great plastic surgeon. The cab had backed even to me now. The door on my side opened. The driver's face was a pale blob, looking at me.

I shook my head. "I'm waiting for the bus."

"Buses haven't run past here in eight years."

At first I thought he was hustling me. Then I thought Groggins could have been playing a game on me. I didn't know anything—why I'd been let out of my coffin, bandaged up, fixed up in lousy clothes, and sent out on the town. "How much to downtown Hollywood?"

"Nothing. I'm on my way in. Climb aboard."

I walked over to the cab, which was black with wavery white letters painted on the door: ZACK'S CABS. I kind of fell in, swinging my hips to drop on the seat, swaying against the driver, hearing a kind of clattery sound which was my shoulder bones grinding together. I got straightened up and sprawled there.

The driver had a big-nosed, tough little face. He got out, strutted around the front of the cab to my side, and pushed the door shut. He strutted back, got in, put things in gear, and we took off at a good clip. He grunted, "You don't look so swift. What happened?"

"I had some bad luck."

"What hospital did you come out of?"

"Uh—" I tried to think of a hospital in the area. Not knowing the area, nothing came to mind.

"Vet's Hospital?"

"Yeah. Vet's."

"Looking for a job?"

"Yeah."

"Ever dispatched?"

"Cabs, you mean?"

"Yeah. We got some openings. You look awful worn down. But you could get built back up."

That's what I had in mind.

I flashed on the picture of me on the beach with my marvelous new face and body, trotting along, the foxes googling.

"Lots of guys in lousy condition have got their act back together at Zack's. There's a kind of dorm there for guys at rock-bottom. Look at me." I did. "A little on the porky side, wouldn't you say?" His tough face bunched in a grin. "You should of seen me twelve years ago when I first started working for Zack. You think *you're* underweight? You don't know what underweight is!"

A lot of tough night people have a soft spot for real hardcase losers. But I wasn't the forlorn stray this guy thought I was. I'd been Rance Rangoon, top-money star and poker ace who had played in games with thousands in the pot. I had my little stake and I wasn't about to sit around in a sleazy cab office in the town where I'd been on top. With a run of luck, I could be on top again fast. A card game, fancy plastic surgeon—that was the route for me.

We'd reached the fringe of the city now. He was gabbing away the way cab drivers do. "I started as a dispatcher, finally got my strength and weight back—then Zack put me in a cab. I'd been a big shot, then had some bad luck, got wiped out. Would you believe I once was a big-time ad man?"

"Sure." Why not? Like I said, this is a sudden town—you're riding high and then your bottom drops out. That could have happened to this guy. He was probably feeding me abalone, but it was possible he'd been in the big time.

"So it was quite a comedown for me, pushing a hack, picking up goons who used to sit three hours in my secretary's office hoping I'd give them ten minutes of my time. But I asked myself, what's the alternative? I'd been as far down as you can get; and I didn't want any more of *that*. How do I feel now? I feel great. Like I been born again. Smartest thing I ever

did was listen to the guy who told me to come to work at Zack's."

I had him pegged. Like a lot of nice guys he felt so good being nice that he was going to make me feel good too, by getting me to do things the way he had done them whether I wanted to or not. He pushed too hard. That's the trouble with nice guys. I said, "I don't think I want to work at a cab company."

He shrugged, drove a few blocks, made some turns, and we were on a downtown street. Not a first-class street—there were a few dumb little shops and bars, a hotel sign with all the lights knocked out—not the neighborhood I wanted to get the upbeat mood I was after. He had slowed, and now he pulled over to the curb.

He gave me a wise-guy look. "You look like a man in a hurry. You might be thinking of a card game to get back on your feet fast. In that hotel there, there's a game goes on most nights. Should be going on now."

"Yeah?" I felt the excitement inside me. I'd had the feeling that, one way or another, I'd turn up a game. And by luck this driver had set me down right in front of one. "You know the room number?"

"It floats around—but try four-seventeen."

I pushed the door handle and the door fell open. I hitched across the seat and got out. "Thanks."

He slid across the seat, got the door, pulled it shut, gave me a flip of his fingers, and put things in gear.

I got a funny feeling and almost called out, "Wait a minute." Then I thought of the card game and the chance it'd give me to get things together in a hurry. All this guy had to offer me was a pipsqueak job, a bed in a dorm with a bunch of broken-down nobodies who had bottomed out, a group of insects crawling around on Hollywood's floor. That wasn't for me. I was Rance Rangoon, Martyr to Love.

I gave him a creaky wave and watched him drive away. Then I turned and, moving pretty good, walked over to the beat-out old hotel.

In the lobby a few dismal specimens were zonked out in ratty-looking chairs and a clerk about eighty-five was collapsed across the desk. I went up the creaky stairs to the fourth floor, wobbly at first but getting used to it, walked down a dim corridor to 417, and knocked.

There were noises, then the door opened a crack. I said, "Card game? Zack's Cabs tipped me."

A short wait, then the door opened enough for me to slide in. The room was pretty dim, which was good. Four guys sat at a round green table. They all looked me over. They didn't seem surprised at how I looked. The guy who had let me in was big and fat, with a hard hood's face and mean little eyes that sized me up as someone who didn't carry a gun and was no threat. He didn't pat me down. I was glad of that—one pat from him could mean broken ribs. He had a rumbly voice. "What's with the bandage, the gloves, the dopey-looking shades?"

"Bad accident. Burns."

"You going to play with gloves, shades, a hat on?"

"If it's O.K."

He looked me over some more, then flopped a hand toward the table. I saw big stacks of bills, including hundreds, in front of the players. This was a big-time game. These guys weren't flotsam like down in the lobby. They had good clothes. I didn't recognize any of them but I'd sat in on games like this and gone to raunchy places to do it sometimes. And tonight I had in my pocket eighty-eight dollars.

I didn't know if it was enough even to ante.

But the excitement was bubbling inside me. I had the feeling that the cards were going to run for me.

I sat down carefully, hearing a screech as some hip bones mashed together. I thought everybody must have heard it, but nobody seemed to.

The guy across from me had a skinny moustache on a spongy, unpleasant face. The ring on his pinky was money. The other players had different faces, all unpleasant, and all of them wore things that showed they were rich—cufflinks, rings, a jeweled tieclip. They looked at me. They didn't like me but I was no worse than any other creep, because everyone was a creep. They didn't look scared or surprised by my looks—I was just a super-skinny, bandaged creep in a mildewed overcoat and a stained hat.

The hood sat down at the far side of the table and picked up the deck of cards. He was the dealer. "Ante is twenty bucks."

The guys all put in the ante. Still nobody said anything. I got out my little wad and pulled through it and got two tens out. "No limit," said the dealer. He was the guy who ran the game. He was big enough to run any game anywhere.

He dealt. Fast, smooth—he was a dealer. I picked up my cards, finding I could manage them all right even with gloves on and nothing but bone

under the gloves. I looked them over. I had tens full over treys.

The guy on the dealer's left had the bet. He pulled hundreds from his stack, laid them in the pot.

"Bet's four hundred," the dealer growled at me.

I pushed my wad into the pot. "I'm in for that."

He counted it with his eyes. "That's sixty-eight dollars."

"I know."

He looked around the table. There were shrugs. They didn't care. They'd let me play out my chickenfeed.

The guy on my left called the four hundred. The next guy raised to a thousand. The last guy dropped. The first guy called. The guy around me called.

The dealer said, "Cards."

Everybody took one or two. I stood pat, and waited while the betting went around with another raise—big money now in the pot. Finally the calling was over, me just sitting there with my pat hand, and the raiser showed what he had. It was a high straight. The others folded their cards. I was left. I showed my full boat.

Somebody made change, and I got \$136 plus my ante. The high straight took the rest.

That was the first hand.

The second was mine again. I doubled my \$136 with three aces.

I doubled that the third hand.

"You're having a run of luck," said the dealer. The others nodded or shrugged.

The game went on, and it kept going that way. I won three more hands, then lost, then won five in a row, then lost again. Then I won twenty-two straight hands. All the big bills were in front of me now. Just a few bills were in front of the other players.

One of the guys got up from the table. His sour, skinny face was sick. "I've lost twenty-five thousand dollars. I have a wife and children. I'm not rich—this tieclip is glass. Most things that impress people are glass." He took off the tieclip, went to the window, opened it wide, and threw the tieclip out. "I'm assistant manager of a bank. The money I lost was the bank's. Now it's jail for me, disgrace and ruin for my family."

He stood at the window, staring down. I said to the dealer, who was closest to him, "Stop him."

"Why?"

The man with the skinny moustache spoke. "This game has been boring." He reached in his jacket and brought out bills—a huge handful of bills. "There's two hundred grand here." He dropped the bills on the table in a tumbled heap. He pulled the gold-mounted diamond ring from his pinky, dropped it on the bills. "That's worth twenty-five grand. And here's a platinum cigarette lighter." It dropped by the ring. "Another twenty-five. I'll play you for that," he said to me, "against what you have on the table."

"It's not near what you have."

"I didn't ask that. I just want to win one hand, so that the night's not a total loss."

The man at the window stared down. "There's no hope left for me."

I said to the moustached man, "What do you want to play?"

"Cut for high card."

One cut—one card. A hundred thousand to lose, \$250,000 to win. I looked at the deck the dealer set between us and wondered if there was one more piece of luck left in there—one more card for me.

The man cut first, looked, turned his hand so we could all see. It was the ten of hearts. He placed his pile back on the deck.

I looked at the deck. I held my right hand bones over it and felt like I was waiting until the bones got the feel that they would make the right cut. I watched the glove move, close on the deck, and pluck up part of it—turning the cut first to the moustached man, then around the table so the others could see, finally to myself. The queen of spades.

The moustached man puffed his lips, shrugged, and stretched. "Oh, well." He got up. "Coming?" he asked the other two men.

They said they guessed so. They got up and all three went to the door.

I looked toward the open window. I said to the dealer, "Where'd that man go?"

"He jumped."

I thought of him for a few seconds, then looked at what was on the table. It was all I needed. Now I could look up that great surgical artist of plastic.

I got up, laid the ring and the lighter aside, and started to stack the heap of money. The other players had gone out the door, closing it behind them.

The dealer sat there and looked at me with his hood's eyes. He said in a soft voice, "Do you think you won all that yourself? I won it for you."



"I'm going to give you something. Though we had no arrangement, and I think you dealt an honest game."

"You won all but two hands and you think I dealt an honest game?"

"Luck is funny sometimes. I'll give you a thousand dollars."

All the money was stacked now, alongside the ring and the lighter. But now he had a .38 in his hand, and was slowly getting up. He had a crooked smile. "Half for me, half for you."

I stepped back, then slowly took off my hat, laid it on the table, pulled off the goggles, laid them there, and pulled off my left glove. He stared at the bones of my hand, which I wiggled—his eyes were like he didn't believe what he saw.

I pulled off my right glove. I moved around the table, wiggling my finger bones at him. Then I unbuttoned the coat and the shirt, showed him my rib cage and the emptiness it curved around.

The gun had dropped from his hand. He was backing away, his face a dead-white slab, his mouth wide and drooling, his eyes lacquered knobs. I moved to him, slow, and pulled at the face bandage, got an edge of it, pulled it loose, passed it around behind my skull, passed it around again, slowly moving in on him, passing the bandage around and around, unwinding it.

He was at the window. I dropped the bandage and pushed my bare face bones at him, dropping my jaw all the way and then snapping it shut, dropping it, snapping it, clicking my good teeth at him. He screamed, a wild and dreadful sound, and then he was gone, backwards, out the window.

I was alone in the room. I buttoned my shirt and overcoat, went back to the table, and put on the hat and gloves. I picked up the bandage and laid it on the table next to the goggles. When I had pocketed my money and jewelry I'd go down the hall, find the washroom, and put the bandage and goggles back on. On the table lay \$300,000 and the ring and the lighter. I felt deep joy—I flashed on myself running on a sun-soaked beach, muscles rippling, the gleaming eyes of the hungry foxes.

Great thumps on the door. "Open up!" The door flew open.

There was a cop. Another was behind him. They had guns. One groaned and the other made gagging sounds. I clicked my teeth at them. They stood and stared at me. Others were in the hall behind them.

I moved to the window. They would close in on me and take me away. There would be doctors, scientists, theologians, social philosophers,

newspapermen, TV cameramen. I would be photographed. They would examine me. Unable to identify me by finger- or toe-prints or the shape of earlobes, they would take impressions of my teeth. I would be identified. Pictures of Rance Rangoon would fill the papers and TV channels—Rangoon as he was, Rangoon as he is now. All that hummed through my head as I stood at the window. The room was now full of cops, stalking toward me. I slid my hip bones over the windowsill, ducked my skull, fell backwards out the window—and was falling, falling through grey mist.

The funny thing is that when I landed I didn't even know it. I just came to the idea that I wasn't falling any more. I was sitting still on pavement and the grey mist was clearing. Over me was the dark sky, and the moon.

I got up and looked around for the bodies of the embezzler and the dealer, but I was alone on the pavement. And the hotel wasn't behind me, city buildings weren't around me. I was on a road with trees along it.

I started walking, not knowing where to, and suddenly there was a splash of headlights, and I heard a motor. I started to run into the trees, but a familiar voice called, "Might as well hop in." I turned and saw Zack's white-lettered black cab.

He opened the door and got out, leaving the motor running. It was the same tough-faced little guy. I walked over and he said, "So that's what you look like under the bandage."

He walked with me around the front of the cab and opened the passenger door. I got in. He closed the door, strutted around, and got in himself. He put the car in gear and we started off up the road.

I said, "I'm ready to go to work for Zack now."

"Maybe you are—but we're going back to the cemetery."

I thought that over as we rolled along. What had Groggins said? I was in a holding pattern. That's when an airplane hangs around over an airport, waiting for things to become clear so it can land or fly on to another airport.

I looked at the solid, fleshy hand on the steering wheel. "You're real, aren't you? You really are a cab driver. There really is a Zack's Cabs. Real guys—"

"And women."

"Real guys and women driving around, picking up real people, making

change, fighting traffic. And all of you were just where I am now. All of you were once dead."

He gave me his wise-guy grin. "You got in a holding pattern like I did. And you went to Zack's and got yourself built up, flesh grew back on your bones. How does that work, anyway?"

"I dunno. It just kind of happens, gradual."

"So after a while you're built up again and Zack puts you in a cab. Then what?"

"I dunno. Something. Guys you know on the cabs, who've been there maybe a long time, maybe a short time—they're not around any more."

"Where do they go?"

"Someplace nice, you hope."

"Then driving for Zack isn't the end of it? It's just where you put in time for a while?"

"Seems like that."

"So you're still in a holding pattern."

"Uh-huh."

"And I'm not in one any more. I wish I'd been given the whole run-down on this."

I thought of the guy at the window, staring down—and me all wrapped up in the last cut of the cards. I said, "The dealer, the other players, the cops, the money—were *they* real?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Was the hotel real?"

"Oh, yeah, it's real—but it's abandoned, condemned."

He had stopped the cab. We were at the low cemetery wall. He opened his door, got out, walked around, and opened my door. I got out. "Thanks for the ride. What do I do now?"

"Go back over the wall. So long, kid." He pushed the door shut, strutted around, got back in, gave me his high-sign. I raised my hand to him and watched him drive away.

I got over the wall, walked a little. I thought of my big night on the town. Everything had sure seemed real.

"Hi." She was sitting on top of my tombstone next to the spaced-out male angel. "You took off the bandage, huh?"

"Yeah. Where's Groggins?"

"He went home to bed."

I went over and leaned on the tombstone on the other side of the angel. "What now? Back into the coffin?"

"If you want. Or you can stay here in the cemetery. There's a nice stream over that way, the birds sound nice early in the morning, the sun feels good, you can watch the people who come to visit. Sometimes dogs come around at night—some you want to watch out for, but some are fun to play with."

"Sounds better than the coffin. Where'll I stay though? Won't people see me?"

"Sure, if you're a show-off." She gave a giggle. "Lie low—learn to move behind things quick. There's a bunch of trees over on the west side that nobody goes around much."

"I'm just supposed to—kind of hang around?"

"You're not supposed to do anything. Do whatever you want to do. Go back to Hollywood if you want."

"No." I was through with my big idea of a comeback. "Am I still in a holding pattern?"

"I think so."

"I thought I blew everything back at the hotel."

"I don't know what you did at the hotel. You're here now—make the best of it." She slid off the tombstone. "And take care of those really great teeth."

She gave me a smile and a wag of her fingers, then turned and walked away. I watched her start to kind of fade at the edges. Then she was gone. All there was left was me and the tombstones.

So here I sit, on top of my memorial—a somewhat unprepossessing character in a gamy overcoat and a stained hat, my bare teeth grinning all over the place, though I don't feel like grinning. I don't know how long I'll have to stay in this holding pattern. That grey mist seems to be coming down.

I'd rather be working at Zack's. There I'd have guys to talk to, customers to yell at on the phone, and gradually I could start building myself up.

But maybe that's not true either. Maybe there isn't any Zack's. Maybe they all came out of my head, and maybe even the cemetery and my tombstone I'm sitting on doesn't exist, or the funky clothes I'm wearing.

Maybe I wasn't ever in my coffin.

Maybe what really happened is that I've been shot by Alfred Grout

and I'm badly wounded, maybe dying, and all this crazy stuff has whirled through my head in just a few seconds. The mist has gotten heavier, everything around me is misty, but it'll clear, and maybe out of it will come the face of a little nurse, smiling, and I'll hear her murmur, "Well, so you decided to come back to us. You're going to be all right now—you're going to be fine."

That's what I'll fix on. Because, in this town, if you want good things to happen you've got to expect that they will.

So when the mist clears I'll find myself in a hospital bed with a pretty nurse smiling at me, telling me everything's O.K., and it's nothing but a superficial wound.

I hear something. I've heard it before.

A mournful howl. Like a sick, scraggly little dog.

I guess I really am in the cemetery. Where I'll stay, as resident spook, until some way I get out of this holding pattern and move onto something else.

The mist is lifting. And there's the dog, sitting looking up at me with its foolish, pathetic eyes.

"Hello, you miserable screwed-up little mutt."

It sure looks hungry.

Maybe if I look around I can find something for it to eat.

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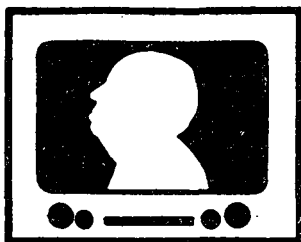
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# CRIME ON SCREEN

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by Peter Christian

Finally, *The Wicker Man* is being released to American audiences. This extraordinary film has been called "the *Citizen Kane* of horror films" and won Grand Prize at the International Festival of Fantasy in Paris but is at heart, despite its horrific finale, an absorbing and complex mystery. As well it might be, having been written by Anthony Shaffer, author of *Sleuth*. Here he is almost equally as tricky, unfolding the strange events which bring a young provincial police officer to a remote island off the Scottish coast.

"None of us have seen May Morrison's daughter Rowan since last year. She's only twelve and has been missing from home for many months," begins the anonymous note to Sergeant Neil Howie of the West Highland Constabulary. Howie is a religious man, a lay preacher in addition to being a police officer, and is troubled by news of a vanished child over whom few people evidently have expressed concern. The letter has come from Summerisle, one of the many privately owned small islands off the wild, rocky coastline under his jurisdiction. He flies to the island, but the residents are a sour, conservative lot, unused to strangers. Some respond to his questions with suspicion and cold hostility. And Howie's discoveries are bewildering.

Why do many of the inhabitants insist that the missing girl is not from the island? That May Morrison's daughter was someone else entirely?

That, in fact, the vanished child does not exist! Finally, when Howie unearths proof that the girl is dead, and finds what he believes to be her grave, he gets reluctant permission to exhume the body, and digs up—instead—the corpse of a hare. Each time the policeman makes some headway in his investigation, he discovers he's made a wrong turn.

The island itself is a strange place. Famed for its lush orchards and good crops, the land is tended by people with strange rites and ways. Lord Summerisle (Christopher Lee), the suave and autocratic ruler of the island, is cheerful host to the police officer, seemingly amused at his perplexity. The lord is not terribly concerned over a vanished child who may or may not exist, and playfully chides the devout Howie for being shocked at the farmers' return to what appears to be pagan rituals. Slowly, Howie evolves a monstrous theory. The previous harvest on Summerisle was poor. Rowan Morrison is not dead, Howie is sure, and the island's residents intend to sacrifice her during the frenzied May Day festivities in the hope of reviving their failing crops.

He tries to return to the mainland for help, but his plane will not start. He then joins the masked May Day fertility celebration in a Punch-costume disguise only to learn "the game is over"—Lord Summerisle's words—and come face to face with the dreaded figure of the wicker man.

An interesting cast brings this Scottish island to life. Edward Woodward (who starred in the long-running crime series *Callan* on British television) plays the tormented police sergeant, while Britt Eklund and Diane Cilento are among the villagers. Anthony Shaffer, who wrote the original screenplay, is more justly famed for his brilliant stage play and film, *Sleuth*, which is no more twisting in its games-playing plot than is the solution of *The Wicker Man*. Shaffer also did the screenplay for Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile*, certainly the most satisfying of all the film versions of her pure whodunits, and prepared Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy* for screen. (He has also adapted Christie's *Evil Under the Sun*, but this movie has yet to be made.) With his twin brother Peter—who wrote the probing psychological thriller, *Equus*—he has collaborated on several detective novels. Actually, although the settings and situations are vastly different, *The Wicker Man* compares with *Sleuth*: both are extraordinarily stylish and intelligent, very cat-and-mouse with a multi-layered puzzle at their core. Both revel in witty, sophisticated dialogue hinting archly at things macabre. As Lord Summerisle in *Wicker*, the urbane Christopher Lee is especially apt. When he smiles pleasantly at the bewildered

police sergeant and says, ever so kindly, "Quite a perplexing problem for you. What do you think could have happened?" we are suddenly, inexplicably, and properly chilled.

Christopher Lee's screen career has long been associated with our genre. The English actor had been a classical scholar at college, and served in the Royal Air Force Intelligence Branch during the war. Turning to acting, his first screen role was a part in the moody psychological film, *Corridor of Mirrors* (1947), which if ever revived is worthy of your attention. Appearances in *Hamlet*, *Moulin Rouge*, and *Moby Dick* followed, but Lee achieved stardom only when a small British studio, Hammer, began a policy of well-mounted color horror films by casting him as the monstrous creation in *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957). Unlike the tradition set by the Boris Karloff-Universal saga, in this film the accent is on the scientist (Peter Cushing), who resurrects his creature *twice* during the movie and goes on in several sequels to create other, better-constructed offspring; Lee was never to play the role again. (In contrast to Universal's Dr. Frankenstein, who was soon killed off, Cushing was in succeeding films not only to survive, but to thrive, prosper, grow mellow and beneficent, and be as deathless as his monster was in the original series.)

In 1958, however, Lee was to get a role which truly fitted his saturnine talents: the six-hundred-year-old vampire Count in *Horror of Dracula*. In a superbly visual and potent version of the Bram Stoker classic, Lee in the end crumbles to dust in sunlight before our very eyes—only to be restored to terror in many inventive subsequent films. The sequels were all varied and interesting—in one Lee plays the Count as a dark, demonic force totally without speech—but the actor soon felt himself far too identified with the part and moved away from it.

Mystery and horror were the mainstays of his career, however. He played the title role in an elaborate remake of *The Mummy*, revived to stalk the English countryside. In 1965 he portrayed a towering Chinese fiend in *The Face of Fu Manchu*, a spectacular new version of the Sax Rohmer books, set in the London of 1920s (actually filmed in Dublin, doubling very nicely), wherein he demonstrates that he is "the most evil and dangerous man in the world" by poisoning an entire English village. Supposedly killed at the end in an explosion, his voice is heard over the smoke: "The world has not heard the last of Fu Manchu!" For sure. Later



films in the series used locations in Spain, Brazil, and Turkey and such exotic death devices as poisoned kisses, but they were not nearly as well made as the first.

Lee was not only to play villains. For a German film company he starred as Sherlock Holmes, with a false nose. (The film was *The Necklace of Death*.) In Hammer's expensive version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the first Holmesian color film, he was the heroic Sir Henry, whom the spectral hound attacks. And for Billy Wilder he played an uncharacteristically thin brother Mycroft in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*—the only actor to play the famed detective and his sibling. He is one of the victims of *The Hands of Orlac*, and one of the victims in *House of Fear*, a retelling of Jekyll-Hyde, as well as playing Dr. Jekyll himself in *I, Monster*, a psychological probing of the Stevenson story. And of course he is James Bond's adversary, the international assassin Scaramanga, in *The Man with the Golden Gun*.

Typical of his starring roles in countless other films is the part he plays in the recent British *Diagnosis Murder*: he is a respected psychiatrist, charming and nasty, trying to do away with his wife. He wants to make the police believe he has murdered her, while actually she is being kept drugged in a farmhouse some miles away. He has the police dig up his estate and drag a nearby lake, and when they are finally convinced the woman has merely run off he will kill her and put her in the lake. That's the plan, but naturally there are double and triple surprises before the plot finishes. The film is wordy and intelligent and somber and good: seek it out.

Lee's finest recent role is Lord Summerisle in *The Wicker Man*; he personally is quite fond of it. The film, too, is worthy of him. Shot totally in Scotland on various rural locations (as well as in a splendid castle serving as Summerisle's ancestral home), great attention is spent on detail, especially the music—Druidlike folk chants composed by the many-talented Paul Giovanni, who you will remember wrote and directed the new Sherlock Holmes play, *The Crucifer of Blood*. Although it deals with the worship of ancient gods, *The Wicker Man* is not an occult or supernatural drama, but a mystery which unravels to a horrific finish. It will absorb you throughout, and when the wicker man at last embraces you your hair will stand on end.

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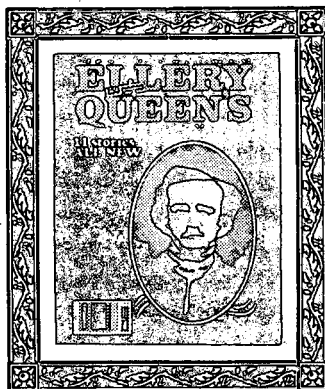
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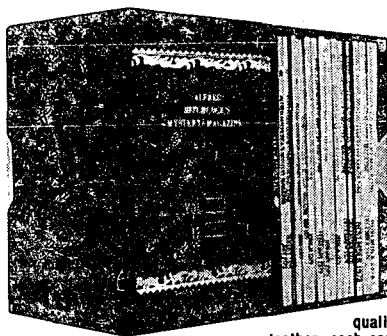
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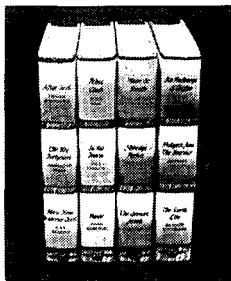
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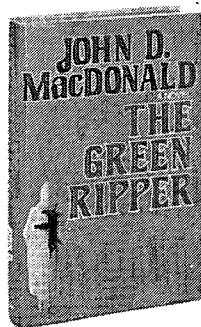
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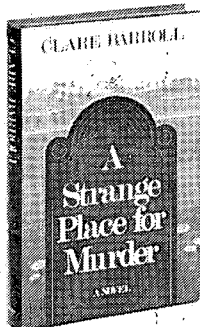
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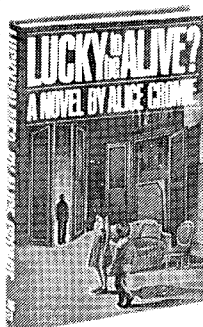
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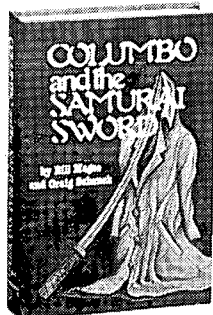
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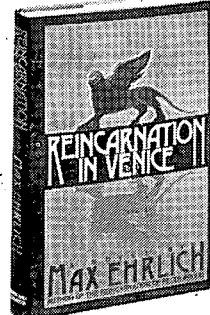
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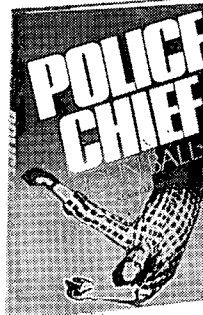
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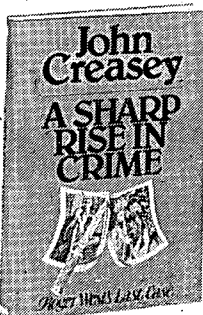
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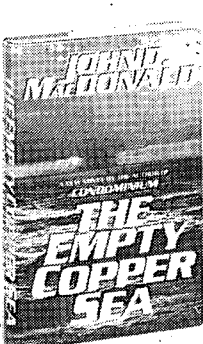
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